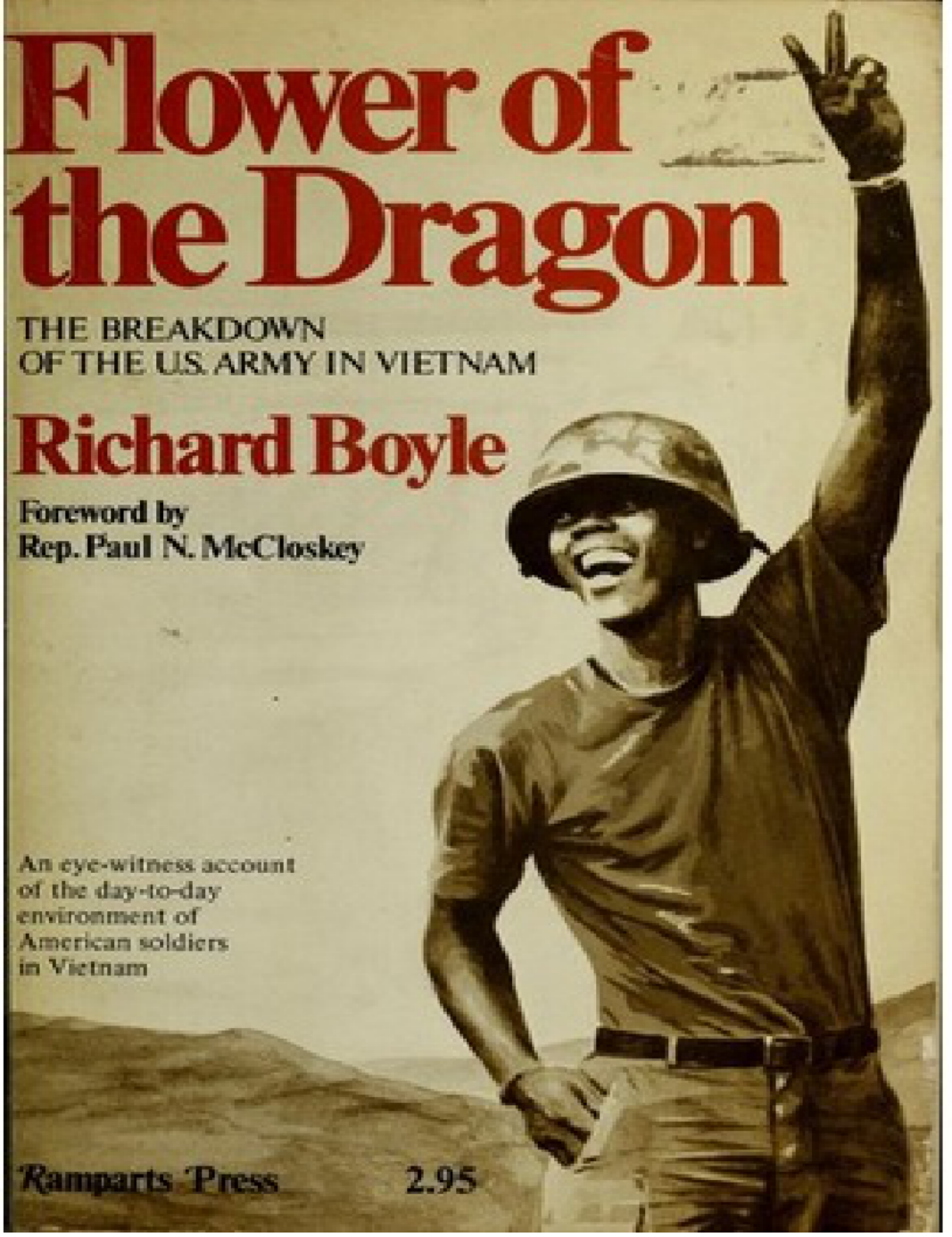
Flower of the Dragon

THE BREAKDOWN
OF THE U.S. ARMY IN VIETNAM

Richard Boyle

Foreword by
Rep. Paul N. McCloskey



An eye-witness account
of the day-to-day
environment of
American soldiers
in Vietnam

Ramparts Press 2.95

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Published by Ramparts Press, Inc., San Francisco, California

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The Flower of the Dragon; The Breakdown of the U.S. Army in Vietnam

By Richard Boyle

An eye-witness account of the day-to-day environment of American soldiers in Vietnam

Photographs by Richard Boyle

Ramparts Press

ISBN 0-87867-020-3

Library of Congress catalog card no. 72-75812

Printed in the United States of America.

The original in pdf form also includes the photos and italicized clarifications.

Dedication

For my sister Suzy,

who first gave me the encouragement to write this book,

and for Rae,

who was with me all the way when times were hardest.

Preface

This book is not the work of one person but a collective effort of many —journalists, GIs, and vets.

I wish to thank Andrew Moss and Rhoda Slanger for their help on the manuscript.

The Flower of the Dragon is a Vietnamese legend. During the era of the dragon, the worst time for mankind, a small budding flower shall spring up. And it shall spread its petals throughout the world. The spiritual power in man shall overcome the brutal force in himself. Love shall overcome death, peace shall overcome war. Man shall love and be free.

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Foreword

Richard Boyle's eyewitness account of the day-to-day environment of American soldiers in Vietnam makes a valuable contribution to perhaps the greatest problem America faces

today—the sober re-evaluation of our national character, ideals and goals. We test the essence of our nation against a wholly new challenge: achieving world peace in an era where war can no longer be recognized as an effective instrument of national policy.

Nowhere have we a concept that deserves searching reexamination more than that of our disastrous involvement in Vietnam. That involvement may be the greatest tragedy in our history. Seeking the truth about that involvement requires the construction of a painful jig-saw puzzle from a welter of conflicting fact and opinions: Presidential decisions based on reasons which had to be withheld not only from the American people but from the Congress as well; State Department and Pentagon statements which were deliberately deceptive, pacification evaluations which challenged belief . . . the history of a beautiful people, the Vietnamese, with their enigmatic forms of political expression, culture, lush and fertile landscape, family affection and reverence for ancestors . . . to which was applied the limitless energies and resources of dynamic Americans confident in their ability to “build a new nation” and “train a fighting army’” as had been done in so many other lands and times.

As Americans we have moved from relative isolation to world dominance within the lifetimes of our elected leaders. We have had to adjust to the shock of our younger generation, the best educated in our history, expressing their anger and rebellion against what we conceived to be the most basic of our principles. That younger generation has finally gotten

through to its elders that there may be something incredibly immoral when the greatest nation on earth deliberately lashes out against one of the smaller countries of the world with the most proficient products of our proud achievements in science and technology.

We use napalm, cluster bombs, B-52s, and gunships to destroy rural peasant hamlets and rice fields. We increase the saturation bombing of populated areas in order to kill or cut off the support for young Vietcong and North Vietnamese soldiers who doggedly fight on and die for a cause in which we have long since been unwilling to risk the lives of our own sons.

Are we any different from that other proud scientific people of a generation ago who watched in passive acquiescence as their leaders ordered the coldblooded extermination of six million Jews?

And if we are no different, how did we become so, this nation of avowed veneration for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness ... for self-determination and adherence to treaty obligations?

Richard Boyle's experience as a free-lance journalist in Vietnam furnishes several pieces of the great jig-saw puzzle—the on-the-spot expressions and conduct of those who performed the ultimate duties of a national policy. The story is told in the language of the soldier, not the clean-shaven, immaculately tailored generals or diplomats who shape policy from air-conditioned villas, headquarters and limousines.

Through Boyle's characters—the dedicated career officer, the polished PR spokesman, the suffering Vietcong prisoner,

and most of all, the young, reluctant American infantry soldier—we begin to understand the enormity of the tragedy, the variance between the presidential pronouncement, “We shall never be humiliated, we shall never be defeated’ and the awful reality of that pronouncement to the one hundred ten American riflemen of Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, Sth Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division at Firebase Pace in October 1971.

Asked to set up a night ambush four hundred yards from their base, sixty-five men, including nine sergeants, signed a petition saying they would face court-martial rather than obey. With American troops steadily withdrawing from the conflict, an American people tired of the war, uncaring as to its resolution, an American Commander-in-Chief was asking too much of his last reservoir of strength: the faith of the nineteen-year-old asked to implement his policies.

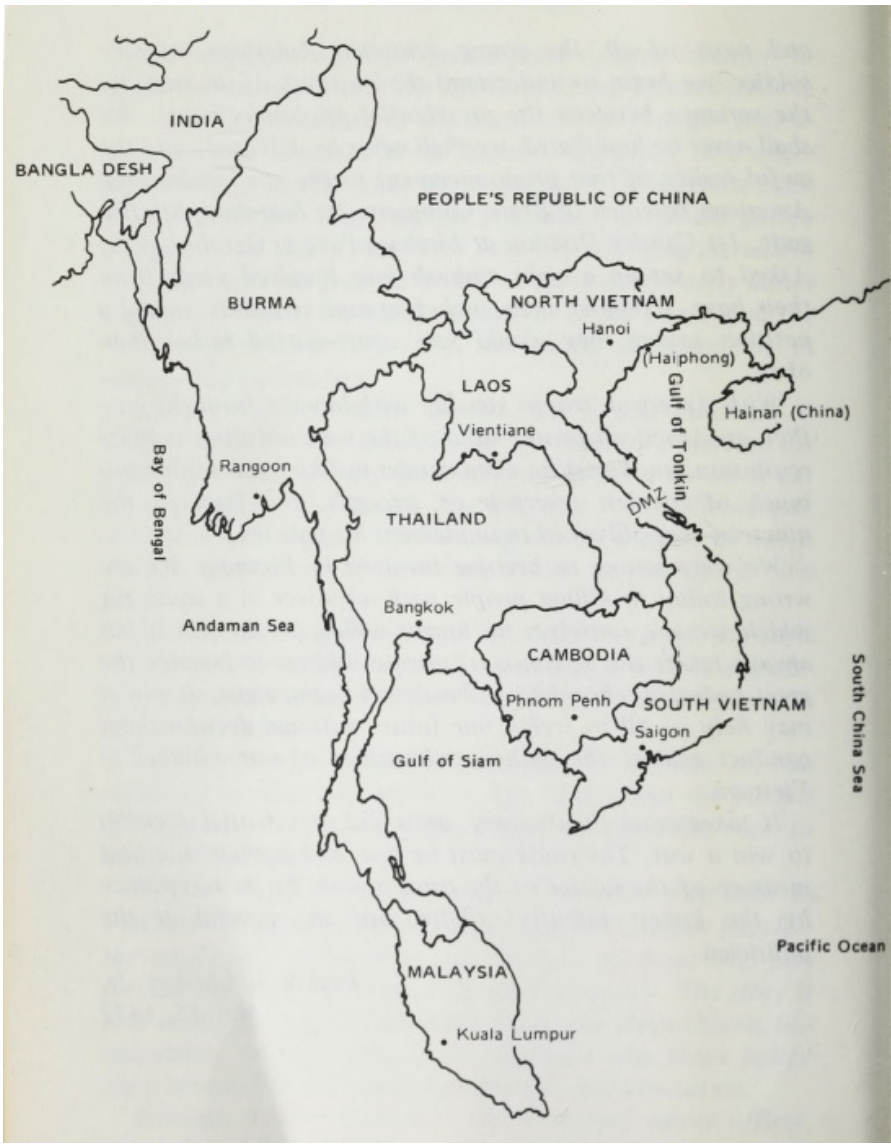
We were wrong to become involved in Vietnam. We are wrong today in killing people with airpower in a cause for which we are ourselves no longer willing to die. As it has always taken the accounts of private soldiers to balance the great historical chronicles of battles and campaigns, so now it may help us all to weigh our future national decisions and conduct against the pathos and tragedy of our conduct in Vietnam.

It takes more than money, arms and presidential decision to win a war. The cause must be just, and perhaps the best measure of the justice of the cause should be its acceptance by the lowest infantry soldier, not the general or the politician.

Paul N. McCloskey, Jr.

May 15, 1972

Maps



Prelude: 1965

It was the middle of February, 1965, and I was in the southern Mekong peninsula playing darts, drinking beer, and waiting for some action. I had been there several days in a

place called Bac Lieu when an American colonel told me that the South Vietnamese Rangers were about to mount an "Eagle Mission'' to trap a suspected Vietcong company in a nearby village.

The Rangers were crack professionals, mercenaries in psychedelic rainbow-patterned helmets and day-glo red scarves. Regular units were unreliable, so the Rangers had become the key reaction force in the Mekong Delta, where the heaviest fighting was going on. With the Saigon government still shaky in the aftermath of Diem's overthrow,* the Rangers had power and they knew it.

I was told that as a reporter I could go in with the second wave of Rangers.

The attack began with a blitz of heavy artillery. Then the village was pounded by an airstrike. Finally U.S. helicopters landed in a blocking pattern around the village and the Rangers began to close in.

*President Ngo Dinh Diem was overthrown in November 1963. Between then and February 1965 there were several presidents, including General "Big" Minh and Nguyen Khanh.--ED.

It was my first time in combat, and I loved it. I had a Special Forces camouflage tiger suit, a carbine, and an Australian bush hat, and I was trudging through the jungle in search of Vietcong.

There was a brief firefight after we landed and then the South Vietnamese troops stormed the village. Most of the

villagers had survived the shelling hidden in home-made bunkers carved out of the ground underneath their houses.

As we moved in, the villagers emerged slowly. The Rangers shouted commands at them and then rounded up all men of military age; they bound their wrists, tied them together by the neck, and marched them off. “They are VC,” an ARVN* captain told me.

Half an hour later snipers from a treeline about thirty yards away began firing on us. A squad of Rangers charged. A BAR—Browning Automatic Rifle—cut two of them down at pointblank range, but the squad managed to flush out four suspects. The Rangers came back with the prisoners tied together in a line -four young men in green shirts and shorts, unarmed, about fourteen or fifteen years old.

The Rangers marched one of the prisoners over to where I was watching with an American adviser, a Ranger captain, and several South Vietnamese NCOs. They squatted him down, tied his arms with his shirt, and the captain began: where was the rest of his company hiding?

The young man-—really he was only a boy—wouldn’t talk. The Ranger captain’s voice rose in pitch as he shouted his questions. Still the prisoner wouldn’t speak. Finally the captain gave an order and a sergeant picked up the prisoner and carried him to a swampy area about two hundred feet away along the riverbank. One of the Rangers kicked the boy in the head and he slumped over, blood gushing from his mouth. I tried to take a picture but the American adviser

* Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the South Vietnamese army.

blocked my camera with his arm. If I took the picture, he told me, I'd never go out with his unit again. Quickly, I put back the lens cap.

The sergeant kicked the boy again, and again he slumped. Two Rangers propped him up and the sergeant took out a bayonet and pressed it against the boy's belly. Still he wouldn't talk. Slowly, with a slight sawing motion, the sergeant pushed the bayonet. The boy let out a whimper, then fell. Again they picked him up and the sergeant resumed hacking at his belly. Strips of intestine oozed out. In a few minutes the boy was dead. He hadn't talked.

The young men from the village had been carrying captured World War II-type American weapons and perhaps a few hundred modern AK-47 assault rifles. The American and South Vietnamese troops had fighter bombers, heavy artillery, tanks and helicopters—all the modern weapons of war. Everything seemed to confirm what the American brass had told me in Saigon: a couple of divisions and the war would be over, the Americans could run the gooks out of the hills in two months. But when I saw that boy die in the village near Bac Lieu I began to feel some doubt. None of the South Vietnamese Rangers would have gone through what that boy did: They were mercenaries, paid well to go out there, and they would have talked. But this young South Vietnamese didn't. I began to feel the war might not be over quite as soon as the brass imagined.

Despite the American adviser's warning I had managed to sneak a picture of a Ranger standing over the boy's body. But

it was three days before I could get back to Saigon and by that time the Eagle Mission was old news. Nobody wanted my photograph, particularly with its caption “VIETCONG PRISONER KILLED BY RANGERS.” The wire services, relying on the daily Army press briefing in Saigon, had reported that the South Vietnamese had repulsed a Vietcong attack, killing fifty-two VC and losing only three men. I had seen the three dead Rangers but I never saw the fifty-two Vietcong.

Later, back in the States, I sold the photograph with a different caption: ‘“RANGER KILLS VIETCONG IN FIREFIGHT.” It was my first copout of the war.

Ever since I was a kid watching James Cagney tell the mobsters, ‘“You can never kill a reporter,” I had wanted to be a journalist. When I was eighteen, in my first job (as a $65-aweek police reporter on a small-town paper), my editor told me a good newsman never allows himself to become emotionally involved with his story. Later, on larger daily papers, I found other editors shared the same idea. The worst they could call a reporter was ‘‘sob sister’; the worst sin was to become involved, get committed, protest. “Play it cool,” I was told; ‘“be objective and you’ll go far.”

So I was well trained as a war correspondent. I could watch a burned infant trying to nurse from its dead mother’s breast, see young men with their faces blown away, witness a boy deliberately gutted . . . and never protest. I tried to get as much of the truth into print as I could, but if the wire services or the magazines didn’t print it the way I reported it, I didn’t protest. I went along with the game. I came to Vietnam

in January 1965 because ever since I was a kid I had wanted to know what war was really like. I managed to save up some money from my meager reporter's pay; got myself a visa, and headed for Vietnam to play war correspondent.

It was easy to go along in Vietnam, because correspondents had to rely on the military for everything. MACV - Military Assistance Command-Vietnam—issued the press cards, and without a press card you couldn't get a ride on a helicopter and you couldn't get onto an Army base, so you couldn't work. With a press card you could sell pictures to the wire services at $15 a shot and—if your pictures were good enough—get hired if a vacancy turned up. Meanwhile there were plenty of goodies from the Army—billets at the comfortable '"press camps," where GIs acted as waiters and bellhops for newsmen; PX privileges, free boots, uniforms, even weapons. In the field, journalists lived in the officers' quarters, ate at the officers' mess, and drank in the officers' clubs. Cooperative reporters got tipoffs. (Few of the press spoke much Vietnamese so we relied heavily on information from the U S. military.)

If you went along with the Army it was a good life. But if - you raised a stink—if you took pictures of prisoners being tortured, or raised any hell at all-the Army would stop cooperating. The South Vietnamese authorities could kick out any newsman who reported something they didn't like, and if they could order out network TV or national magazine staff, I knew I wouldn't stand a chance. So I went out, took pictures of people dying, came back and sold them, took my

money, and went out again. The more the suffering, the better the pictures.

My first friend in Vietnam was a young lieutenant in the U.S. Navy. Dale Meyerkord was adviser to a South Vietnamese river fleet fighting on the tributaries of the Mekong River near Vinh Long.

I went out with Meyerkord after I got back from the Eagle Mission, and got shot at for the first time. We were sailing along in a flotilla of surplus American landing craft and old French gunboats when a Vietcong force ambushed us in a narrow bend of a canal. Ignoring the heavy fire, Meyerkord jumped up on deck and began blasting away at the VC with his own carbine. Later he told me that if his crew saw any fear in him they would refuse to fight.

Meyerkord understood that this was a political war and could be won not with guns but by winning the allegiance of the Vietnamese people. So his flotilla brought food and medical supplies to the villages along the river, and Meyerkord would get out and talk to the villagers in fluent Vietnamese. Unlike most American advisers, he had won the friendship of the Vietnamese he worked with; he was even godfather to a Vietnamese child. Meyerkord's public relations job was so successful that the Vietcong kept jacking up the price on his head.

One evening Meyerkord told me why he had come to Vietnam. He said America was at a stage like the twilight of the Roman Empire, with barbarian armies nibbling away at her frontiers. If America was to remain strong and free, he said,

her young men must be prepared to fight—if necessary, to die - to hold the line. Vietnam, he thought, was a major test between “our way of life and theirs.” If America lost the test she would be finished, gradually overrun by the barbarian armies of communism. ‘“There will be no Pearl Harbor,” he said. “It will be gradual, piece by piece, until there is nothing left.”

Many of the young officers I met in 1965 shared Meyerkord’s views, and most of them also shared his high morale. (Most were volunteers. Since Vietnam was the only war we had, it was the place for a young career officer to be.) Privately, though, they admitted that the South Vietnamese weren’t worth much as fighters. By February 1965 the Army of the Republic of Vietnam—the ARVN—was losing a battalion a month to the Communists, and the Americans suspected it might collapse completely before the summer. But over beers the young American lieutenants and captains would say -like the brass in Saigon—that it would take only a couple of American divisions to clean up the whole thing. Surely the army that had crushed Hitler’s Panzer divisions and raced to the Rhine would have little trouble with the Vietcong.

In the beginning of 1965 there were between twenty and thirty thousand U.S. military personnel in Vietnam: advisers to the South Vietnamese army, Green Berets, helicopter crews and logistical support troops. There were no line infantry units. For political reasons, the U.S. was hesitant to commit ground troops to the war. But it was becoming increasingly

apparent to military planners that the South Vietnamese were losing the war and that something had to be done.

Then, in February, the Communists attacked the American base at Pleiku. U.S. bombers attacked North Vietnam and plans were formulated to introduce ground troops. A pretext had been found.

Pleiku lies on Route 19, the vital east-west link across northern Vietnam. From Pleiku the road runs east across the Mang Yang Pass to An Khe, then down to the coast about halfway between Saigon and Hue. If the Vietcong took Route 19, they could cut South Vietnam in two, blocking off the entire north and isolating the old capital, Hue, and the big U.S. base at Da Nang. Any South Vietnamese or American forces trapped in the north could then be gobbled up at leisure.

In Saigon, we heard after the Pleiku attack that a major Vietcong assault was shaping up near the American base at An Khe, which guarded the eastern end of the Mang Yang Pass. I flew up and arrived at the An Khe camp in early March. It was a Special Forces camp, defended by a handful of Green Berets and several hundred Montagnard mercenaries.* The camp was surrounded by Communists.

* The Montagnards—‘‘mountain people’’ indigenous to Vietnam —are of Polynesian stock. Pushed back into the hills centuries ago by the colonizing Vietnamese, the Montagnards live on the land nobody wants, the beautiful but inhospitable Central Highlands. They have always despised the Vietnamese.

The French used the Montagnards as mercenaries against the Viet Minh and in the 1960s the Green Berets recruited them for the CIDG (Civilian Irregular Defense Groups). It was to the Americans, not the Saigon government, that the Montagnards paid allegiance.

A week earlier a South Vietnamese relief force had tried to battle its way across from Pleiku to relieve An Khe and had been wiped out at the Mang Yang Pass. A few nights later, a Green Beret captain told me, the VC had tried to storm the camp. They had massed hundreds of villagers and farm animals in front of them as shields, forcing the camp's defenders to shoot down women and children. The captain had only a third of his original force left and he knew the Vietcong would try again. One of his lieutenants gave me a snub-nosed .38 revolver—*'just in case the camp is overrun."

"There is only one thing I know," said the lieutenant. "I'm not going to be captured alive." He told me how the Vietcong would cut off a man's testicles and stuff them into his mouth.

As I was talking to the captain, a sergeant came running over to say that Col. Theodore Mataxis, the senior American adviser in II Corps, was on his way. We raced over to the helicopter pad to meet Mataxis, the top U.S. tactician for this crucial military sector. The Green Berets snapped sharp salutes as he jumped out of the chopper.

After the Green Beret captain gave a brief situation report, Mataxis said another relief was on its way: it would be leaving Pleiku soon to try to fight its way through the pass. I asked

Mataxis whether he thought the relief column would make it.
“I don’t know,” he said. “The Mang Yang Pass is a bad place.”
“I’m going to be flying over the pass on my way back to Pleiku,” he added. “Want to come along?”
I wanted combat shots so I grabbed the chance, hoping to link up with the relief convoy before it left Pleiku. As we climbed into the air over Route 19, the colonel told me that the North Vietnamese might throw the entire regiment into the battle for the pass. I asked him how long Saigon could hold out if they took Mang Yang.
“Who knows? Maybe six months, maybe a year. But not much longer.”
Mataxis, an infantry commander with experience in both World War II and Korea, was a rising star in the army. With his short, close-cropped grey hair and green baseball hat he looked like a football coach. I liked him. Unlike some of the colonels and generals who hung around Saigon, he had flair. Like most Americans, though, he believed that a small force of American ground troops must be introduced to save the regime. The Americans, he said, would have to reopen Route 19 and protect the vital northern bases like Da Nang. But Mataxis understood that it was a political war; he proposed that instead of throwing in whole divisions the U.S. bring in ten brigades, one for each South Vietnamese division. The American troops would bolster the ARVN, but not take over the war completely. Without those ten brigades, he said, the South Vietnamese would lose.
“How well do you think the American soldier will do in

Vietnam, Colonel?" I asked him.

"Damn well!" The American Army in 1965 was the best in the world, he said. Its new mobile warfare divisions, like the elite First Cavalry and the 101st Airborne, were worth three Russian or five Chinese divisions. "I've seen our boys in both World War II and Korea," he told me, '"and they are the finest troops in the world."

Many generals, Mataxis told me, were reluctant to send American draftees against regular North Vietnamese line regiments—historically draftees had been poor troops in colonial wars. But to lose Vietnam, he said, would mean the loss of Cambodia, the switching of Thailand to a neutral or procommunist position, and the sandwiching of Malaysia between a left-leaning Indonesia to the south and a communist north. America, he said, had to throw in its troops if it was to hold the country, and the decision had to come fast.

Mataxis, as senior adviser to II** Corps, had the ability to get his views heard: he had recommended his ten-brigade scheme to the Pentagon in the then-secret "Mataxis Plan."

"There it is," he said. Ahead of us we could see the pass, the narrow slit of highway plugging through purple-brown mountains. As we flew over we could see what looked like an army of ants on the road below. It was a company of Montagnard mercenaries trooping along the road toward the pass, sent out by the Green Berets from An Khe to link up with the relief column coming from the west.

Mataxis ordered his pilot to fly lower. "Shit''—he grabbed my shoulder-"see that?"

About a mile ahead of the Montagnards, along both sides of the pass, several hundred Vietcong were waiting in trenches. It was a simple crisscross ambush, a favorite of the Vietcong; they would rake the Montagnards with machinegun fire from both sides of the pass. The chopper pilot hauled back on his stick to take us up. The Vietcong held their fire, not wanting to alert the Montagnards.

“Try to get the patrol on the radio,” commanded Mataxis.

His communications man tried several times to make contact, but couldn’t raise the patrol. The Montagnards were now half a mile from the ambush. “Those men don’t have a chance,” said Mataxis. “I’m going down.”

The chopper went into a steep dive and my stomach began to squirm. As we flew lower Mataxis tried to wave the patrol back, but the commander didn’t understand. The pilot dropped the chopper on the highway, plunk, and Mataxis jumped out to warn the commander. As soon as he got back in the chopper the Vietcong opened fire. The chopper gyrated wildly, weaving to escape the Vietcong ground fire; the patrol hit the sides of the road for cover. It had been a gamble, but it had worked.

But when we got to Pleiku it was too late: the relief convoy had already left. That evening I watched the survivors come back. One American had been shot in the chest with a B-40 rocket, and although the hole was as big as a fist, he was still alive. Many of the others had died on the pass.

In March the-decision was taken and the first Marines came ashore at Da Nang. A short while later American paratroopers

would be trudging up Route 19 towards the Mang Yang Pass. It was the beginning of American ground troop commitment in South Vietnam.

If I had been a better reporter I might have understood what was happening. But I was more interested in heroism stories. In 1965, editors wanted stories about the Green Berets, America's flamboyant supermen. The Berets played their role well: they were tough, brave, idealistic, the perfect American heroes. (And already a myth: Barry Sadler sang about them, comic books retold their exploits, and John Wayne was about to make them immortal.) So in my dispatches I wrote up the lean, lantern-jawed Green Berets at An Khe. The Berets made good copy; Meyerkord jumping on the deck with his carbine made good copy; so did Mataxis taking his chopper down into the Mang Yang Pass. If I had paid more attention to the faces of the Vietcong prisoners at Bac Lieu, or to the way the young man had died there, I might have seen things differently. But as America marched off to war against the "little people," I marched with her.

After I returned from Pleiku I went back to Vinh Long to see Meyerkord. We went into town to drink some beer at a restaurant overlooking the Mekong River.

"Il know I am going to die," he told me.

"No, you're not, I know you'll make it." I smiled but he didn't, and I felt uneasy.

"And I know how they are going to do it. They'll simply block the canal and cut off the retreat."

Back in Saigon I had lunch with Dickey Chapelle, a correspondent

for National Geographic who had also done a story on Meyerkord. She had saved his life by firing a warning shot with her carbine, springing a VC ambush.

A few months later I was back in the States, hospitalized for hepatitis. One morning I opened a copy of Life and found a two-page article entitled “In Search of a Hero” about Meyerkord. He was dead, killed the way he said it would happen. Dickey Chapelle, who had survived with Castro in ‘ the hills and with the guerrillas in Algeria, had stepped on a mine and was dead too.

Their deaths made me very angry. After I got out of the hospital I started speaking in favor of the war. I called my friends traitors for not seeing it my way. Like many Americans I believed the president and I believed my country was in the right. I was a hawk and I stayed a hawk until 1969, when I returned to Vietnam.

1969

Saigon

When I first came to Saigon in early 1965, there were beautiful wide tree-lined streets, terraced apartments and open parks. Four years later the trees were gone, cut down so that U.S. Army trucks could pass unimpeded by overhead branches, the rivers filthy, the parks barricaded, and the apartments slums. Piles of garbage littered the streets. Tu Do street, once the fashionable shopping area, had become one long strip of girlie bars and massage parlors which gave hand jobs or blow jobs to sex-starved GIs. All over, prices had

skyrocketed, in some cases to six times what they were in 1965. Some apartments were going for $300 or $400 a month, while a South Vietnamese private or low-level bureaucrat was earning $10 a month.

The biggest and meanest rats in Saigon had become army generals, police chiefs or key officeholders. Like President Thieu, many of them had Swiss bank accounts and villas in Europe. They had plush mansions at the old French seacoast resort of Vung Tau and mountain villas in cool, lush Dalat. For them the war was great; it made them rich. America was a sugar-candy mountain, a soda fountain of money juice that never ran dry.

When I arrived in Saigon in June I needed fatigue uniforms, combat boots, canteens, an air mattress, a sleeping bag, a web belt, and so on. The U.S. Army sold the stuff to war correspondents at a big profit—in '65 we used to get it free-so I asked the neighborhood cyclo driver to help me; he peddled me down a maze of back alleys to a huge warehouse. After knocking on the door three times, like a tout taking walls of new U.S. combat boots, uniforms, sleeping bags, radios, rafts, bottles of Scotch, pup tents, T-shirts—almost every type of Army gear issued. I was completely outfitted for about half the price the Army charged.

On the sidewalks of Saigon black marketeers hawked Johnny Walker Black Label, Arrow shirts, clocks, army socks, transistor radios and other merchandise from the PX. When the Vietnamese cops--called White Mice because of their baggy white uniforms—ambled down the street, they

would look the other way and the profiteers would pick up their loot and move further down the block. Often stuff meant for the GIs never even got to the PX: the black marketeers ambushed it at the docks, paying the GI drivers good green dollars to take a fifteen-minute coffee break while they unloaded the supplies.

Graft and corruption in Saigon formed a giant pyramid with Thieu sitting on the top. At the bottom was the White Mouse, who shook down bargirls for money. The cop paid his captain to keep his job, the captain paid the district police chief, who forked over to his boss- and up it went, all the way to the president. The whores and bargirls had to split the take with their “mama-san,” who had to pay the owner of the bar, usually a former army general or other crony of Thieu. Like an inverted funnel, the money flowed upward, always ending up at the presidential palace. Province chiefs, military commanders, government leaders, all had to pay for their jobs and all collected their “employment fees” from their underlings.

At the very bottom of this huge pyramid was the American GI: he got nothing. In 1969, the half million GIs in Vietnam were looked upon not as defenders of freedom but as consumers. Sex was the biggest product. A sex-starved GI

would stumble into a girlie joint after weeks of combat and a beautiful girl in a low-cut dress would whisper seductively in his ear, “Let’s go where we can be alone.” She would nibble his ear, whisper sweet nothings, and massage his cock under

the table, promising to take him home with her. Meanwhile, $1.25 “Saigon teas”—cold tea in a whiskey glass- were being plunked on the table. If the GI refused to pay, hired goons would work him over and then call the MPs. Usually the soldier would just pay and leave, several dollars poorer and a lot hornier. With half a million American Gls paying through the nose for everything they got, the intake must have come to billions for Thieu and his business associates.

In 1969 the biggest source of profit to the Saigon hoodlum empire was money manipulation. The Saigon government had placed an artificial value on its currency of 118 piasters to the U.S. dollar (it has since been revalued), but on the open market one dollar could buy between three hundred and three hundred fifty piasters.

The black market, propped up by Saigon’s artificial exchange rate, was a big help to Hanoi. Until mid-1970 and the coup against Cambodia’s Prince Sihanouk, the North Vietnamese used the port of Sihanoukville to take delivery of badly needed war materiel. They then hired transport companies owned by the local Chinese to supply Communist troops in eastern Cambodia. But the Chinese truckers wouldn’t take Russian roubles so the North Vietnamese had to come up with a steady flow of dollars from their agents in Saigon. In one of the tragic ironies of the war, the U.S. supplied the greenbacks needed by the North Vietnamese to pay for the bullets to kill American soldiers.

To halt the black market on money, the U.S. military has issued MPC-military scrip currency which is worthless outside

Vietnam. But instead of stopping money manipulation, the MPC has created an even bigger black market. One MPC dollar was supposed to be worth one U.S. dollar, but anyone

could buy almost two MPC dollars for one greenback. Instead of one way to get rich on the black market, there were now two. Fortunes were made overnight in MPC. If a speculator started with one thousand U.S. dollars, he could buy eighteen hundred in scrip. With that he could buy eighteen hundred dollars worth of merchandise at the PX—-TV sets, Scotch, cigarettes, shirts, tape recorders, tape casettes—and resell it all on the black market for four thousand dollars. With the four thousand going back round the circuit he could quadruple his money each time.

The GIs paid bargirls, whores and dope dealers in MPC, making it a recognized form of currency and destroying the original intent of keeping U.S. currency out of the hands of the South Vietnamese. Then one day the Americans made it illegal for Vietnamese to have military scrip, declared all the old MPC worthless, and issued new bills. Thousands of Vietnamese were caught with millions in worthless MPC. There were riots outside Army bases, with outraged mama-sans waving their life's savings in the air. The Army locked up all the GIs, but some officers bought up thousands of dollars of MPC from panic-stricken mama-sans at one tenth the value—and resold it to the government at par.

Rumors of a troop pullout would send the price of the piaster downward and rumors of an MPC change would drop

the value of military scrip—but encouraging news would drive the prices back up. It was like the stock market: insiders with the right information could make a fortune. In 1969, black marketeers, like stockbrokers or lawyers, were well-respected members of the Saigon elite and welcome guests at the homes of the foreign community.

It seemed everybody in Saigon was in on the take. There were gambling concessions, rakeoffs from the one-armed bandits and kickbacks from salesmen and Vietnamese employees. Entertainers coming to Vietnam had to split their fees (and often take off their clothes) for club managers.

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Drinks were watered and club managers sold the unused bottles on the black market. For every hundred tons of building materials allocated to hamlet rebuilding, the people were lucky to see twenty. I even heard of two Green Berets selling American guns to the Communists—for which they were probably paid in U.S. dollars. Even the Vietcong took their cut. In 1965 they stopped American oil trucks delivering fuel to American units and collected a tax. This suited both the o0il companies, whose trucks were not blown up, and the National Liberation Front, which needed U.S. dollars more than airplane fuel.

In 1969 in crazy Vietnam it seemed America wanted a war so badly it was willing to pay both sides to fight it.

Ben Het

I arrived in Saigon in June 69 with about twelve dollars in

my pocket, intending to go back to work as a free-lance photographer. It was much easier to get accredited if you had newspaper backing, so as soon as I was installed in a crummy hotel I phonied up a letter from a newspaper and went to get my credentials.

Competition for stories was terrible in 1969. There were about six hundred journalists in the country, about a third of them Americans, and only two hundred fifty or so had real jobs. As in 1965, the idea was to make a name for yourself as a free-lancer and then get hired by one of the Saigon bureaus. But the war had reached a lull in early 1969 and American interest in Vietnam was falling off. Fewer stories were coming out of the country, newspapers were reducing their staffs, and the Saigon bureaus were cutting back. A lot of photographers and reporters were sitting around Saigon with nothing to do.

If a free-lancer did get a job he would have to go in as a photographer, and that was like being cannon fodder. A reporter could fake a story from the comparative safety of battalion headquarters. He would ask the Army commander what was happening; the commander would tell him, “We killed x number of North Vietnamese, lost so many men, and we’re trying to take hill such and such,” and the reporter could go back to Saigon to write up the story. A photogra- ‘ pher had to go out there and take pictures of people shooting

at each other—the more action, the better the pictures, but

the better chances of getting shot himself.

Often it was difficult just to get into combat. In 1969 the U.S. Army wasn't trying to stop anyone, but their helicopters took heavy losses because of ground fire. Many of the firefights were at night, and most of the battles were over very quickly. The North Vietnamese might ambush a convoy or the Americans surprise an NVA battalion, there would be a short firefight, and that would be it. All this made it difficult to get good combat photographs; even if you did, most of the fighting was so far out in the boondocks it took days to get back. By the time you were in Saigon the story was old news and nobody wanted it.

For my first story, I went out with the First Cavalry (to the north of Saigon) flying around in a two-seater loach helicopter with a big bubble on the top. Loaches fly really low, skimming along fast over the rice paddies. The pilot dropped us where there had been a big battle: the North Vietnamese tried to overrun some First Cav units. I got some pictures of dead bodies but there was no story in it.

Then I went out patrolling with the Marines in the Arizona Territory, a godforsaken strip of wasteland up in I Corps by the DMZ. The Marines had been patrolling there since 1965, taking and retaking the same patches of territory hundreds of times. Their casualties had been fierce- worse than the Army's because they weren't trained or equipped for that kind of war. Our company made contact with some Vietcong snipers and a Marine was killed, a young Cherokee Indian. I watched him die, waiting for the Medevac chopper and listening

to a Marine curse: “‘This fucking country can get a man into space but they can’t get a helicopter here in time.” But by the time I got back to Saigon it was an old story and nobody wanted my photographs.

After a month in the country I hadn’t sold anything and I was beginning to get desperate. I was broke - and there is no

place you can hitch to from South Vietnam. Then I began to hear about Ben Het.

In August 1969, shortly after the press made international headlines of the heavy U.S. losses at Hamburger Hill,* President Nixon announced that U.S. ground troops were to be withdrawn from Vietnam and their areas of operation turned over to South Vietnamese units. It was the beginning of “Vietnamization.” At the same time, I heard that the North Vietnamese 66th Regiment was digging in around Ben Het, an isolated Special Forces camp in the Central Highlands triborder area where Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia meet. The troops of the 66th, one of the best North Vietnamese regiments, began a long siege of the camp that was to be the first test of the new Vietnamization policy.

At first Ben Het didn’t attract the attention of the Saigon press corps because the Army wasn’t talking about the siege. But after fifty days of continuous shelling, when nearly all of the rescue columns from Dak To had been mangled, the press began to ask if the camp could be held. It was in a South Vietnamese area of operations—Washington had pulled back the American Fourth Division and given responsibility to the

ARVN as part of Vietnamization—so it was ARVN responsibility to lift the siege. But the ARVN wasn't doing too well.

One evening at the "five o'clock follies" the daily Army press briefing in Saigon--a reporter from the Stars and Stripes told me that the NVA had trapped the Special Forces team and their Montagnard mercenaries at Ben Het and that the South Vietnamese were doing nothing to lift the siege. That made it a good story: Ben Het had become a political battle. If the Americans had to come in to save it, or if the camp fell, it would be a major blow to Vietnamization.

* An American infantry company was badly mauled by NVA troops in an attempt to take Hamburger Hill in the Au Shau Valley, causing heavy political repercussions in the U.S.

Ben Het 41

I flew to Pleiku on the off chance of getting into Ben Het. After being stuck in the Pleiku press camp for two days, I got word one morning that a network news team at Kontum had managed to get a helicopter from a general and we had a ride to Ben Het. But after waiting all morning at the Kontum landing zone, we got the bad news-there were eight correspondents waiting to go, but only six seats on the chopper.

This was my last chance at getting a story good enough to land a job in one of the major bureaus, so I jumped on the Huey first. A network television star, a chubby, baby-faced man, shouted, "Okay —get off." I didn't move.

"Who are you with anyway?" he demanded.

"The San Francisco Chronicle," I lied.

But the TV crew had muscle with the brass so the rest of

us decided to flip a coin for the seats. Over four hundred men at Ben Het would have given anything to get out, and here we were flipping a coin to get in. As I waved good-bye to the losers, two British correspondents, I couldn't help feeling maybe they were really the winners.

It was about a ten-minute flight to Ben Het. From the air the camp looked like a naked anthill flanked by two smaller anthills. We came in low and fast, hugging the treetops, to give the NVA gunners less time to shoot. A grey mist hung over the green mountains and a waterfall gushed below us. I was nearest to the door and I tensed my muscles, waiting for the race from the chopper. We knew they would open up on us as soon as we started to land.

We leaped from the chopper and raced for the nearest foxhole. The Huey raced off and not a shot was fired. I looked around for a minute and made a dash for the main bunker, not believing we had really made it.

The TV star, Don Webster, lined up his crew and immediately started questioning the first GI he could collar.

"Tell me, soldier, what do you do here all day?"

"Stay in my fucking hole and try not to get hit."

Ben Het was a garbage dump. Shell cases, Pepsi cans, toilet paper and boxes were littered everywhere. The bunkers were nothing more than smashed sandbags and lumber. Hardly a square inch had been spared by the NVA artillery fire. But everything was quiet. Only the breeze made a slight whooshing sound as it blew in from the west. "This place isn't so

bad," I thought to myself.

Then the first shell hit, about thirty yards to my right, then another about twenty yards to my left, then a third, and a fourth and a fifth. I heard a GI cry out and saw two medics run to get him, but they were cut down by flying shrapnel. Ollie Noonan, a young AP photographer who was with me on the helicopter, raced off to get a shot of the wounded man, and I went too.

We reached the wounded man. His buttocks looked like raw hamburger. As the medics raced for cover with him, more rounds came pounding in. I was caught in the open, shooting the medics with my Nikon camera. I couldn't see a foxhole; I just dashed about frantically as more shells began to explode.

"Over here," someone shouted.

Diving into a narrow two-man bunker, I felt like hugging the GI crouched in back. There was blood all over the inside of the bunker, and although one side of it was caved in, it was the most welcome place in the world.

"Shit," said the GI, "I've only been in Nam a week and already I''m in the worst place."

We huddled in the bunker for twenty minutes, waiting for the shelling to stop. Under shelling, you don't talk, you just hunch up against the wall and hope you don't get hit. Finally the shelling was over and the GIs began to climb out of their

holes. One of them immediately spotted me for a journalist. "Hey," he shouted, '"tell the people back home to get us

out of here. We're losing too many men in this useless, stupid war."

It was hardly what I had expected American troops to say. I wanted to find out if he was just one pissed-off guy or if this was the feeling of the whole unit. About a dozen Gls, all artillerymen from Alpha Battery, Sixth Battalion, Fourteenth Artillery, gathered round.

"Does what he says go for all of you?" I asked.

"Sure does," said another, and the rest of them nodded.

Alpha Battery, they said, was one of three batteries brought into Ben Het to hold off the North Vietnamese. Besides a handful of Special Forces and the Army brass observing the battle, they were the only American soldiers in the camp. After seven weeks of heavy pounding, Alpha Battery had lost seventy-two of its men, either killed or wounded.

"How many men do you have left?" I asked a GI with a peace symbol on his helmet.

"Fifty-three."

"Wait," said another GI. "We just lost four. It's forty-nine now."

"Listen," said the soldier with the peace symbol, Pfc. James Roby of Brunswick, Maryland—'"the generals are experimenting. They don't give a damn about the Gls. We're nothing but guinea pigs out here."

Roby, nineteen years old and bone weary, said a Vietnamese Marine colonel had told the Stars and Stripes that the

Americans at Ben Het were being used as bait to lure the North Vietnamese. It was an experiment to show the ARVN could stand up against the best the North Vietnamese could throw against them. But the bait was being nibbled away, Roby said, and the South Vietnamese army refused to come in to help. ARVN escorts for the rescue convoys would run

at the first sound of fire, leaving the American truck drivers to make it on their own. Alpha Battery's own forward observer had been sent out with a squad of South Vietnamese troops on a recent mission; when his arm was blown off in an ambush the ARVN deserted him, leaving him to bleed to death.

"ARVN ain't worth a fuck," said a black troop. "If Charley don't get us, ARVN will. Three times ARVN 155s [howitzers] hit our positions. We called a check-fire and they lifted the barrage. But later they fired again."

"How could they make a mistake like that?"

"I don't think it was a mistake."

Later, I checked the incident with the sergeant who had been on duty at the communications bunker. I got the same story. "They even kept firing after we called a check-fire. ARVNs aren't worth a damn. Every time they get scared, they run, just like the time they left our FO [forward observer] out there."

One of the grunts said he had nothing against the NVA. "He's getting shot up just like us. I'd give Nixon and Ho a rifle and let them go at it and let the troops of both sides go

home. I'll tell you one thing: if they ever try to send me back here, I'll go AWOL first."

I had heard grousing and bitching before, but with these men it was different. They cursed the brass, they cursed their own officers, and they cursed the politicians who had got them there. They were nearing the breaking point; fifty days of constant pounding by the NVA, days with no hot food, with little water and less sleep—it was taking its toll. "I'll tell you," said one of them who had just lost one of his best buddies, "our morale is very low. They just have to bring American troops in and end this experiment."

I decided to stick around Ben Het and find out what was happening. In fact, I didn't have much choice: the Medevac chopper had just taken off with the wounded (and the TV

crew) and there would probably be nothing going out till the next day.

Just then an artilleryman came running up. "Sheeet, you should have seen those TV guys run for that dustoff I Medevac]. They almost knocked off the wounded. They were so scared they left some of their stuff behind."

Alpha Battery, with a company of Cambodian mercenaries, occupied one flanking hill of Ben Het, while two batteries of U.S. artillerymen and some Montagnard mercenaries held the other. The middle hill was held by about a dozen Green Berets with a couple of companies of Montagnards. The TOC-Tactical Operations Center—the main headquarters bunker, was located here and this was the most

protected hill.

A muddy road joined the three hills and vehicles trying to make the run from one hill to another were target practice for the North Vietnamese gunners. Ollie Noonan and I managed to get some Green Berets to drive us in a jeep, which stalled in the mud as the North Vietnamese zeroed in on us. There we were in the jeep, its wheels spinning in the mud while the NVA was lobbing in shells. Finally the jeep got going and we churned up the muddy road to the central hill.

Inside the perimeter—three layers of barbed wire with spaced machine-gun positions the hill was a mountain of destroyed buildings, smashed timbers, and sandbags. The command bunker was a mound of shot-up sandbags up at the top of the hill. Somewhere down in the bunkers were the Green Beret defenders.

As we reached the TOC the first person I saw was Sean "Flynn, another free-lancer. Sean and Shunske Akasuka, a photographer for UPI, were the only newsmen in the camp at the time. The Berets thought Flynn was crazy. With his shoulder holster and his beat-up Special Forces hat, he looked like a character out of an adventure movie—and in

fact he had been a movie actor (Son of Captain Blood) and also a big-game hunter and a fashion photographer. When the Berets asked him why he was a war correspondent, he just smiled.

That first night at Ben Het I slept in the Green Beret

teamhouse, a kind of combination clubhouse and bar for the Green Beret “A” team. There was no protection in the teamhouse; almost any kind of round could come right through it and blow your head off. Quickly I found out where the most cover was: a sandbagged bunker about fifty feet below the TOC where most of the Green Berets slept. There were no spare bunks but I managed to find a place on the floor, and with an air mattress and a poncho I was fairly comfortable.

With the Green Beret daily routine--patrols, intelligence reports, checking on the Montagnard perimeter guards—the camp’s defenders were fairly busy. In the evenings, unless they had night watch, they would sit around the teamhouse rapping and drinking beer. The first day I talked a little to Rex Mathews, a lieutenant who was second in command of the camp. I told him what the artillerymen had said on the other hill--that they wanted no part of the war; in fact they wanted out. Mathews thought they were chickenshit. I told him it looked like their captain was no longer really in command; he was just sitting in his bunker. “What would happen,” I asked, “if the artillerymen decided the captain wasn’t in command? What if they rebelled, took the hill, and decided they weren’t going to fight anymore? What would you do?”

“I guess we’d go over there and kick the shit out of them.”

Ben Het, one of the fifty or sixty Special Forces “A” camps set up in the mid-sixties, had by 1969 become a key position in the defense of the entire Central Highlands. Through Ben Het ran one of the few roads on which the

North Vietnamese could bring up tanks against the key bases

at Pleiku and Kontum. And behind Pleiku was Route 19, the vital east-west link in the II Corps area.

The *”A” camps, running along the entire South Vietnamese border from the DMZ down to the Mekong Delta, had in effect become the South Vietnamese “western front.” The big guns in the artillery bases supported by the camps held back the North Vietnamese army, and each “A” camp could support its neighbors in the event of attack. Though - the North Vietnamese infantry could easily bypass the camps—the NVA’s General Giap could run several divisions through the jungle between any pair of camps the camps could effectively stop any kind of armored or mobile attack by plugging the roads. Each camp was defended by a few Green Berets and their mercenaries (at Ben Het there were two companies of Montagnards and one of Cambodians) and as well as defending the artillerymen and their guns the mercenaries would mount sweeps between the camps to cut off North Vietnamese infiltration.

There were no ground troops around Ben Het. There had been some ARVN units around the camp at the beginning of the battle, the Green Berets told me, but they had been badly mauled and now they didn’t want to come back into combat. Before Vietnamization the Americans could have sent in American troops-perhaps the 101st Airborne to chase the North Vietnamese back, but now there were no troops to do this. The mercenaries--the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups,

or CIDG—had fought well, according to the Berets, but they were being overwhelmed.

The Americans had tried to open the road from Dak To, seven miles to the east, to bring in relief convoys, but the North Vietnamese would wait till each convoy got to the last mile and then blow it away. The Berets called it “suicide mile.” From the camp they could see the North Vietnamese wiping out convoy after convoy and they were pretty sure that if they could wipe out convoys, they could wipe out the e

camp itself. Apparently there was more military value for the NVA in letting the camp survive and destroying the convoys. Ben Het had become the bait.

Inside the camp, we were taking from one to two hundred artillery rounds a day. The North Vietnamese would start up in the morning with an opening barrage and keep it going till evening (at night the muzzle flashes of their guns were too easy to detect). Nowhere at Ben Het was safe from the shells but being inside was a lot safer than being outside. Outside you had to run, crouching, from bunker to bunker, trying to avoid the shrapnel. You never saw the North Vietnamese. There would be a loud noise, like a giant pop, and then a rain of tiny razor-edged pieces of metal. It was the shrapnel that could really mess you up. Unless it was a direct hit the concussion seldom killed; but after the first shell you knew you had only a couple of seconds before the air was full of flying razor blades.

On my third day at Ben Het I was sitting in the teamhouse, finishing breakfast and chatting with some of the Green Berets. Mathews, the lieutenant, and a sergeant-a middleaged former deputy sheriff with '"Ho sucks' written on his hardhat -were reading a gory newspaper account of some girls who had been killed by bears in Yellowstone. Sean Flynn was also there.

"Ho should be getting up soon," said the sergeant. He meant the shelling would be starting soon. I felt safe in the teamhouse, whose tin roof was padded with a few sandbags. They couldn't stop an artillery shell, but just the idea of being inside made me feel safe. I should have known better. At first there was just a white flash, then a concussion like a giant shock wave. I dropped to the floor, covering my head with my arms. Debris was falling and the room was thick with dust. I jumped to my feet and somehow got my legs to move- it was like running in a dream. We had a few seconds to get to the sanctuary of the TOC bunker.

More stumbling than running, we fell into the TOC bunker as more shells exploded around us. We looked at each other for a moment, breathing hard. We were all alive. They had made a direct hit on the teamhouse, looking for wounded or dead. "Well, good morning, Ho," said the sergeant. The Beret came scrambling back. "Nobody's in there, but they fucked up our coffee pot."

"Shit," said the former deputy sheriff, "war is one thing,

but when they screw up our coffee pot, that's something else. Let's go get those fucking gooks." The men laughed and started feeling better. "Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirtynine," droned the guy counting the shells.

The Berets edged closer to the mouth of the bunker, where there was no protection, to get a better look at the shells landing. Like a man sticking his head in a lion's mouth they would wait for a shell to land, then duck back into the bunker as the shrapnel tinkled against the shredded tin roof. "Seventy-eight, seventy-nine," the count continued.

An hour later they were still counting. '"Hundred fourteen, hundred fifteen..."

"Okay," said the camp commander, Capt. Eric Noble, "let's go get 'em."

Noble and a master sergeant decided to take a Montagnard patrol outside the wire perimeter; it would be the first patrol in days. The idea was to find out what the NVA was doing, and if possible to blow up the elaborate network of trenches creeping up the hill towards the besieged camp.

I watched as the master sergeant, Carl Mayse, gave his orders in the Montagnard language and the patrol shaped up and moved towards the wire. Only a few minutes later they were back. The patrol had barely got beyond the wire when two NVA troops popped out of a hole and started throwing grenades. Noble, the captain, had been hit by shrapnel. The Berets decided to take another patrol out next day.

That night in the camp we heard digging around the perimeter. Noble, the camp commander, said he thought the NVA were going to dig trenches under the perimeter and then blow a gap. Next day he took a second patrol to find out about the tunneling.

The Berets liked Shunske Akasuka, the UPI photographer, and agreed to let him go along on the patrol. At first they said I couldn't go. It was a hairy patrol—-two Americans and less than a hundred scared Montagnards against an entire regiment of NVA—and they didn't want more than one noncombatant along. But I scrounged a .45-caliber submachine gun from the artillerymen and asked Noble again if I could go out. Since I was armed, he said it would be okay.

As the patrol moved out, slowly, silently, I looked at the men and wondered what was really going on in their heads. Would the Montagnards die for the Saigon government? They couldn't desert -most of them had their families with them at Ben Het. Perhaps they knew what the American artillerymen were saying, that they were pawns in someone else's game.

We went about two hundred yards, down to the base ofa hill, without any contact, and then the Montagnards began to slow down. They were in no hurry. A South Vietnamese LLDB* kicked one of them in the ass; the others just stared as he shouted, presumably telling them to hurry up.

At the base of the hill we began to circle the camp. Still

there was no contact. Apparently the North Vietnamese had decided to pull back and let the patrol go around. (“Playing with our minds,” said Lieutenant Mathews.) As we moved slowly round the camp the Berets found tunnels forming a complex bunker system leading up the hill towards the wire. Each time we found a tunnel mouth, Mathews would lay a demolition charge and blow it up. Finally, after making a full

* Luc-Luong Dac-Biet—Vietnamese Special Forces.

circuit, we returned to the camp and found that someone had broken the North Vietnamese code name for the siege of Ben Het. It was “Operation Dien Bien Phu.”

After seven days of steady pounding and nights without sleep, running from shells, waiting for those flying razor blades, it began to get spooky. Ben Het might fall any night. The North Vietnamese had brought tanks against it once before, in the second and deepest tank attack of the war, and the Berets were worried they might try it again. Could air power alone hold Ben Het? Anyway, I was staying; I wanted to see the last act.

I was in a bunker, daydreaming, when the thundering ofa five-hundred-pound bomb exploding jarred me out of my reverie. I looked out over the sandbagged parapet. World War II-vintage Skyraiders were pounding the NVA positions. It was a spectacular show. Arching in low, they would tilt their wings and drop the bomb-—-you could see it bounce like a basketball. Then I realized something strange was happening. It was five P.M. and the North Vietnamese hadn’t fired a shot

all day. After sixty days under fire, suddenly it was quiet. Running from bunker to bunker I made my way to the well-punctured teamhouse. The Green Berets had broken out the camp's beer and were celebrating. The sixty-day siege had been lifted: Ben Het was saved.

"It looks like Clyde [GI lingo for enemy troops] has hauled ass back to Cambodia," shouted one Beret, wiping the beer off his chin. The Berets were getting drunk. For sixty days there hadn't been any good news. Each day they had waited for the attack, the burned-out trucks on the road a constant reminder that if they needed help they wouldn't get it. Some of them had resigned themselves to the fact that the North Vietnamese were coming, as they had hit Lang Vel in 1967, with massive waves of men behind Russian-made tanks. Lang Vei had been overrun, and the few American survivors

who made it back had been forced to run through the NVA lines to Khe Sanh.

Now it was all over, and the press shuttle was back in operation. The Saigon commandos, in their clean, pressed jungle fatigues, were back at the '"front," running around with their microphones like sports writers in the winning team's locker after the game.

I was having a beer at the makeshift bar in the teamhouse when one of the TV people said, "I''m sorry I missed all the action." Just then a shell hit, not too far from the teamhouse, and a second one sprayed us with dirt and rocks. It was a big one—heavy artillery. The TV man hesitated and

was knocked off the bar stool by scrambling Green Berets running for their lives. Every time he tried to get up someone would run him into the floor. The third shell hit as I leaped into the TOC bunker. We cringed in the bunker and prayed that it would be over soon, but the shells kept pouring in. Shunske and I knew they would be bringing the wounded into the camp's underground hospital, so we grabbed our cameras and raced for the dispensary. The hospital was a chamber of horrors. Many of the men had left their bunkers for the first time in weeks and had been caught unprotected when the first barrage hit. A prone figure shrouded in a sheet outside the bunker entrance was evidence that it would be a bad night.

In the hospital the two camp doctors were desperately fighting a losing battle to save a young Montagnard soldier. One of them was literally holding in the man's brains. Then the other pulled back the dying man's eyelid and flashed a small light. He snapped it off with a jerk, pulled the sheet over the dead man's face and shouted to his medics: "Next!"

Outside our bunker we could hear small-arms fire from all around the camp. The Montagnards had opened up with their carbines. Though we could hear the firing and see streams of tracers going up, nobody in the medical bunker knew what

was happening; we didn't even know what was going on in the next bunker.

I thought there was a good chance the NVA would hit Ben Het that night. First there would be a sapper attack to break through the perimeter wire and throw the camp into confusion, then the whole NVA regiment would come pouring in behind the sappers. (Once they were in the camp they would be safe from air strikes.) Sappers are specially trained commandos who can cut through wire in minutes; they come in stripped naked, with bands of grenades strapped around them, and pop grenades down into the bunkers. If they take a bunker they cut loose with its machine gun, and then the whole camp goes into confusion. Nobody knows who's firing from each bunker, sappers or friendlies. The camp disintegrates into isolated bunkers, each one waiting for a sapper to appear and pop a potato-masher grenade over the parapet.

Five or six newsmen, two doctors, two medics and a handful of Montagnards couldn't hold the bunker if the camp was overrun. What were we going to do? Fight in the bunker? Try to make it to the TOC? Run? It would be a long trek to Dak To, seven miles away through the NVA lines.

We decided to try to hold the medical bunker. Some of the newsmen agreed to help defend the bunker, and I took the first shift at the mouth with one of the two doctors.

There was heavy fire all around us. The twin dusters to our right, looking like giant machine guns, were spitting cannon shells. Arching tracers of machine-gun fire raked the blackness. There was also the heavy whoosh of incoming rockets and the thud of artillery mixed with the sound of

small-arms fire. We still didn't know if the camp had actually been hit or if the Montagnards were just getting jittery, pouring out small-arms fire to make the NVA keep their heads down.

"I heard the ARVN left an American forward observer outside the camp," I said to the doctor to pass the time while we were on guard duty.

"Yes, we treated him."

"But I thought he was left behind."

"Yes, he was. Look, please don't use my name or it'll be my ass, but something strange happened that day. You'll find this hard to believe, but I saw the man. He was brought back to the outskirts of the camp by the North Vietnamese."

Like a five-second sun, a flare would light up the ground as it burst overhead. We would see the covered bodies of the dead, laid out close to us. Large black rats scurried over the bodies; they were everywhere, running and screaming. I hated the rats. I remembered the death agony of a woman bitten by a rabid rat at An Khe in 1965. All the medics could do was watch her twist and scream, frothing at the mouth, tied to a bed.

"You don't look good. Go down and tell the medic to take your temperature," the doctor said. My temperature was 103 and the fever was getting worse. First I would sweat, then would go into deep chills. "It may be malaria," the doctor said, "but I can't tell without tests. You're in bad shape. I'm going to call a Medevac."

I told him I hated helicopters and would rather take my chances on the ground.

“Okay, but stay here so I can keep an eye on your temperature. You’d better sleep on the operating table. The rats scurry around the floor at night, and it’s no fun to have one run over your face while you’re sleeping.”

They had tried to clean off the operating table where the young Montagnard died, but his blood still stained the table. A few hours before, the doctors had been picking pieces of his scalp off it. I could hear the rats running around all night and the thud of artillery. It was the worst night of my life.

Ben Het 57

Next morning my fever was gone and so were the North Vietnamese. Last night had been their parting shot before slipping back into Cambodia. The story was over and I had to get back to Saigon with my film.

Grabbing a helicopter, I flew to Dak To. It was a gamble, but I was willing to try anything. I had to beat Shunske to Saigon. At Dak To I saw three American Gls sitting on the ground at the helicopter pad.

- “Know if there’s anything going to Pleiku?”

“Nope, sorry. But in about four hours we’re driving to Kontum. It’ll be crowded, but there’s always room for one gnore.”

Kontum was halfway to Pleiku, so I decided to go with them. I was wearing a Green Beret tiger suit and a floppy jungle hat, so they thought I was just another soldier.

“You look tired, brother,” said a soldier in loose-fitting

fatigues. “How ’bout a J?” (“J” is the GI term for a joint.)
We went into a conex, a large portable van, and passed around a hand-rolled joint.
“Hey, what are you in, the Beanies [Special Forces]?” one of them asked.
“No, I'm a civilian. A photographer.”
“Shit. A photographer. Can you beat that.”
I was beginning to feel the effects of the grass. I rested my head against the wall and felt very glad to be alive and out of Ben Het. The GI took a deep drag on the joint, sucking in air, smiled, and handed me the roach. “You know, it’s funny. never turned on until I got to Nam. If the Army knew how many heads they were making it would blow their fucking minds.”
“I’ve been looking at the same walls and the same barbed wire and doing the same thing for nine months,” said his buddy, lighting up another joint. “If it weren’t for Mary Jane I’d be in the KO [psychiatric] ward right now.”
A lieutenant stuck his head in the conex and shouted,

“Haul your ass out of here. We’re moving out.”
“Doesn’t he care about you turning on?” I asked after he left.
“Shit, no. He knows everybody around here blows weed. If he got tough and pressed charges he wouldn’t have anybody left in his unit. The assholes are the lifers. They try to fuck us. They get bombed every night on booze until they fall all over each other, and if we try to do our heads we end

up in LBJ [Long Binh Jail]."

"Man, what a beautiful world it would be if we all smoked dope instead of doing this shit," said the other soldier.

"Doesn't he mind if you smoke weed while you're working?"

"Fuck, no. As long as we do our jobs, we can get stoned from the minute we get up until the minute we hit the sack. And that's what we do. We're stoned all day long. At least in that way it's better than back in the world. We get all the cheap grass we want. The mama-sans even bring it on the base."

He handed me a fistful of marijuana as we piled into the back of one of the trucks, which were carrying large refrigerated vans.

"We can sit on top and do another J," he said.

"What's in these vans?" I asked.

"Stiffs. We're in Graves Registration."

The Graves Registration units follow the action and after a battle they go out and collect the dead bodies. Sometimes they have to pick up pieces and carefully put them into large plastic bags marked with the dead soldier's dog-tag number and name. They then place the bags into slots in large refrigerated vans and haul them to receiving stations, or ship them out by air if possible.

We smoked Js on top of the death wagon all the way back to Kontum.

The Green Machine

When I got back to Saigon after a two-day trip from Ben Het I was dead tired and stinking dirty, with a week's stubble of beard on my face. I was broke and needed a job fast; I didn't even have enough money to stay in my fleabag hotel. Shunske had beaten me with his film from Ben Het so nobody wanted my stuff.

I had heard that a paper called the *Overseas Weekly*, which was read mostly by Gls, bought stories from free-lancers but didn't pay much. I doubted I could get a job there, but I needed money desperately so it seemed worth the chance.

The *Overseas Weekly* looked a little like the *National Enquirer*. A tabloid with huge black headlines, it always had a giant World War Il-type pinup on the back page. It was called the "Oversexed Weekly' by the brass and its biggest problem was that most people never looked beyond the pinup. If I had ever bothered to read the paper I would have found out why the *Wall Street Journal* had called it a cross between a parrot and a tiger: 'It looks kind of funny, but when it squawks you had better listen." Another magazine called it "the voice the Pentagon tried to shut up." In Europe the Weekly had broken the story that Maj. Gen. Edwin A. Walker was using his position to push the John Birch

philosophy*: Walker was relieved of his command but the Weekly earned the hatred of the Pentagon, which tried to bar it from PXs. The paper took the matter to Congress and won some concessions, but military commanders could still seize

it in the mail and take it off the shelves of the PX.

Until the Weekly came out with its Pacific edition, the military's own Stars and Stripes had the news monopoly for GIs. Since the Stars and Stripes, put out by soldiers under the supervision of the high command, was the only fresh news the troops could get, the military could control information to the troops. When the Weekly came out it told the troops things the Army didn't want them to hear. It covered courtmartials, which the regular press usually ignored, and often came up with exclusives.

I went down to the Weekly office and asked the woman in the office, an attractive redhead in her thirties, if I could speak to the editor.

"I am the editor," she said.

Four years before, Ann Bryan was a shy, rather innocent Texan sent to Vietnam by the Weekly to build a Pacific edition from the ground up. Working by herself for most of the first year, she had flown combat missions in fighter planes, trudged into combat with the grunts and put out the paper almost singlehandedly. Along with Dickey Chapelle and a few other women war correspondents, she had become something of a legend in Vietnam, well liked and respected by her male colleagues in the press corps.

"I just came back from Ben Het and I have a story," I told her. She said the Weekly had a reporter trying to get into Ben

* "General Walker . . . joined [the John Birch Society] in 1959, shortly after the society was formed. While commanding the 24th Infantry Division in Germany, Walker had installed a compulsory '"Pro-Blue"

program that embraced readings from Billy James Hargis and eventuated in his forced resignation in 1961." William W. Turner, Power on the Right (Berkeley: Ramparts Press, 1971) pp. 26-27.

Het with the relief convoy but she would look at what I wrote. I sat down at the typewriter and pounded it out then and there. She liked it and offered me a job. I was to start the next day.

I got myself an apartment about a mile away near the Saigon River—a fifth-floor apartment with a fine balcony to watch the war from—and next morning I took a cyclo down to the Overseas Weekly. When I came into the office I found a strikingly beautiful woman at the typewriter, a Eurasian with a rounded face and long black hair. Her name was Jacqueline Desdames; she was half French and half Vietnamese.

I decided the Weekly might be a nice place to work.

"I'm going to the Cercle Sportique," Jacqueline announced at lunch time. "Want to come?" As we walked slowly down one of the last boulevards in Saigon which still had trees, Vietnamese children coming home from school laughed and played around us. It could have been a residential street in a small midwestern town on a peaceful summer afternoon.

The Cercle Sportique is a big country club right in the middle of Saigon. Two days after Ben Het, there I was in the baking sun next to the pool, watching the press, the fatcat Vietnamese generals and the remains of the French community playing tennis and sipping cocktails.

It was pleasant, working for the Weekly. I filed about three stories a week, and after awhile Ann let me do whatever stories I wanted. I'd cover a story, type it up in the morning at the office and in the afternoon go to the Cercle Sportique and lie around in the sun. I'd work again from about four to six-thirty, then go out at night. There was a lot to do. There were parties every night the French parties were the most chic. Or you could go to first-run movies at the officers' club, or get drunk, or go to the girlie bars on Tu Do Street.

Through one of the women who was a writer on the Weekly, I met Roger Steffens, a sergeant in Psychological

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Operations "Psyops." Roger lived in a huge rambling apartment with Jack Martin, a Psyops artist, and every night there would be a big party at their place-just a whole lot of people sitting around and rapping. Jack had painted an entire wall of the place like a scene from 2001: A Space Odyssey, with rockets, galaxies, and solar systems. The wall was backlighted and people would just turn the lights off, lie back, and trip through space.

Most of the GIs I met through Roger were professionals, doing in Saigon what they had done before they joined the Army. Roger had been an actor so they put him in Psyops, which was supposed to win the war by psyching out the other side. Jack Martin had been an artist so they had him doing posters. Larry Russo had been a disc jockey so they made him a disc jockey on AFVN (Armed Forces -Vietnam).

In Psyops the GIs were involved in weird stunts like following the ARVN out in the field and shouting “Chieu Hoi!” (“Open Arms”) at the VC so they would desert. (The VC had their people doing the same thing.) Roger told me about one remarkable Psyops operation designed to secure the loyalty of the Montagnards. Psyops dropped thousands of transistor radios on the Montagnard areas, presumably so the Montagnards would pick them up and listen to the word of freedom. Unfortunately they printed the instructions in Vietnamese, which the Montagnards can’t read most of them can’t even read their own language. The VC told the Montagnards that the Americans had dropped booby traps from the air, and if anybody touched them they would get blown up. Then the VC went out and picked up the transistor radios. What they did with them Roger didn’t know. Maybe they took them apart and made bigger radios, or maybe they used them to listen to Radio Hanoi.

By 1969 most of the professionals in Saigon had decided that the war was a fiasco. This was especially true of the guys

running the press releases. Each division had its own press corps, and with ten U.S. divisions in the country, there were hundreds of GIs cranking out press releases. Most of them seemed to have decided it was all bullshit. Some opted out and got stoned all day, others tried sabotaging the operation in small ways. There was a famous poster artist in Psyops who had been given an assignment to depict the Psyops cleanliness campaign. He drew a poster with a little girl on it for

the campaign, but he added an extra touch: he gave the girl pubic hair. It was subtle but it was there, and the Army printed it. Next time they gave him an assignment to do a poster showing the glorious ARVN overcoming the VC. This time he drew it straight, but he gave the ARVN AK-47s and gave American M-16s to the VC.

None of the Americans I met in Saigon seemed to have . much contact with the Vietnamese. The enlisted men generally lived in hotels with other enlisted men (including the Meyerkord Hotel, named after my friend Dale). But living in hotels, most of which were owned by Vietnamese generals, could be a drag, so often a GI would rent an apartment. There he could shut the door, pull the drapes, and shut Vietnam completely out of his head. The Cercle Sportique was like a country club anywhere, the hotels like hotels anywhere, and your apartment was whatever you wanted to make it. Vietnam was something that was outside the door, something you could shut out if you wanted to.

For most of the troops in Saigon the war didn't have much reality. Roger Steffens told me that during the Tet offensive, when Saigon (and even the U.S. embassy) was under attack, he had sneaked on top of his hotel to watch it all, the air strikes, the rockets, the fighting. He said it was like watching a movie; he hadn't felt part of it at all.

For the Saigon commandos, Vietnam was a fantasia, a place into which they had been dumped by chance and in

which they had to survive somehow. The GIs have an expression

for it. They call every place outside Vietnam ‘“back in the world.” ¥4

My first assignment with the Overseas Weekly was to cover court-martials. The Army operated a conveyor-belt judicial system in which GIIs received speedy, slam-bang trials before they were sentenced. Most of them didn’t even know what was happening while they were on trial. The Army itself brought the accusations, judged, prosecuted, even defended. - The jury was a panel of senior officers, usually between the } ranks of captain and lieutenant colonel. A GI could ask for one third of his jury to be enlisted men, but that could be worse because the Army would pick lifer top-sergeants. Either way, the draftee was sure of getting a lifer jury, certainly not a jury of his peers. The jurors might even be drinking buddies of the unit commander who had ordered the accused to stand trial. i

Many of the cases I covered involved soldiers refusing to go into combat, striking their officers, refusing orders, deserting, sometimes killing their superiors. It all added up to one thing—they had had enough.

As the war dragged on, the dissent grew. At the Ninth Infantry Division’s Firebase Schroeder in the Mekong Delta, American helicopters had accidentally wiped out an American infantry unit. The other outfits were beginning to show the signs of mutiny--striking officers, refusing to fight, deserting. The Army came down hard and the trials I covered l one afternoon at My Tho were the backwash. i

Sp4 Adam Wentworth* was a shy, soft-spoken black point E;

man (“walking point” means being the first man on a patrol) with Charlie Company, Thirtieth Infantry, Ninth Infantry } * Pseudonyms have been used for the courtmartialed men to ensure their privacy. Otherwise the facts have not been changed.—-ED.

Division. Around nineteen years old, he had been in over one hundred combat assaults and had won the Bronze Star for valor, three Army Commendation Medals (two of them for valor in the face of the enemy), the Air Medal, and the Soldier’s Medal for saving a man’s life. Wentworth was no coward or malingerer.

Before he came up for trial, I sneaked a chance to talk to 'him. He looked exhausted. “I saw things no man of my age should see,” he told me. “There is only so much you can take.”

Thoughtful but deliberate, he tried to describe the night he saw many of his friends cut down by American helicopters. “We went in with sixty-eight and came back with twentythree. People were dying all around me. I told my best buddy, Gibson, ‘Stay down, you’re running around in a mine-field.” A few seconds later both his feet were blown off at the ankles. Another man next to me was hit in the stomach and his guts were hanging out. He might have lived, but the medics gave him a shot--I think it was morphine [never to be administered in cases of stomach wounds] —and he died.”

' Wentworth himself had had a grenade shot off his pistol belt by a VC bullet.

“So many refused to go out after that happened . . . if you aren’t safe from even your own choppers ...” His voice trailed off and he looked down at the floor. “If it’s okay, I'd ' rather not talk about it.”

Wentworth was getting letters from his mother back home in the South, always with more bad news. “My father gets drunk all the time and spends all of Mom’s money. When he gets drunk he gets crazy mean. I send my pay to help out Mom, but I'm scared. If I got my legs blown off or something, I don’t know how my mother would get by.”

The pressures of his home life kept building until he thought he would crack so he went to the only place he could find help, the chaplain. “I tried talking to the sky pilot,

but it was like talking to a chair.” Wentworth’s complaint about chaplains was echoed repeatedly to me by GIs. The biggest problem was that a soldier in trouble often had nowhere to go for help. If he went to his commanding officer, he was likely to get called a lousy coward.

So Wentworth was a very distraught young man when Sgt. Paul M. Saunders of the mortar platoon, a white, came up to him three months before. As Wentworth described it: “This guy was hollering and pointing in my face and saying couldn’t take it [combat]. ‘Don’t you be talking to me like that,” I said, but he kept jabbing me with his finger. I felt shouldn’t have to take that from any man, especially a guy who has seen the shit I had, so I belted him.” The sergeant’s

abuse so outraged the other GIs listening that they joined Wentworth in throwing the sergeant out of the compound.

Now Wentworth was standing trial. “Okay, you’re next,” said the MP without feeling. Wentworth looked at me as they took him off and said, almost pleadingly: *“I want to do something with my life when I get out of here. I don’t want to be like my ol’ man. But if they give me a dishonorable [discharge], I'll be fucked for the rest of my life.”

Wentworth’s trial was a farce. As soon as I entered the courtroom and saw the faces of his seven jurors, I knew he didn’t have a chance. Even Wentworth’s Army-appointed lawyer told him to plead guilty. When his attorney, in closing summation, told the jury, “This man gave as much to his country as any nation has a right to expect,” one senior officer was staring out of the window and another was doodling cartoons of the defense counsel.

Despite the lawyer’s plea for leniency because Wentworth was a war hero, had troubles at home. and had tried to find help, the case was cut and dried. Verdict: guilty. Sentence: one year at hard labor and a dishonorable discharge. “Next case,” said the law officer.

The next man was white. Pvt. Henry LaSalle of Bravo

Company, 2/39th Infantry, Ninth Infantry Division, hadn’t hit anybody, but he had blown his mind out in the war. “Five months [in combat] was all I could take,” LaSalle told me in the recess. I finally decided this is it, don’t give a shit anymore. Pve seen too many unbelievable things.”

When things got too bad, LaSalle took the same escape as thousands of his buddies—he turned to drugs. In this case it was Binoctal, a French headache medicine sold legally in ‘Vietnam. Binoctal, a powerful barbiturate, in 1969 had killed some soldiers and turned hundreds more into raving maniacs. “Every time I felt nervous I took these pills. They really knock you out. I don’t know if they’re habit-forming, but most of the time I need them so much I feel that I just gotta ' have them.”

Like Wentworth, LaSalle saw he needed some kind of help fast so he signed up for two group therapy sessions. At the first session only one other soldier showed up, and at the second he was the only patient, so the sessions were cancelled.

One day LaSalle was so doped up and numb on Binoctal that he didn’t even know what was happening when he was ordered to go into combat; he just ignored the command. “My sergeant called me a coward and told me he thought was bullshitting, but I simply didn’t care about anything.”

From his wife’s letters, LaSalle knew his marriage was in trouble. A stint in Army prison would just about finish it. Hunching over his crutches (he’d been injured in a noncombat accident), he poured it all out. I have never seen my baby girl. All I want is a decent life with my wife and my baby. I think I can overcome my problem with my wife beside me ...” He started to cry but held it back, his face contorted as he went on: “Ever since I enlisted I have been in conflict with the service. I've tried to be a good soldier, so

help me, but I just can't be what the military wants me to be. I just can't adjust."

Like Wentworth, and like most of the GIs in trouble, LaSalle had never had much of a home life. He never knew e ——————————————————————————— y ———— his father; his mother died when he was eight. He ran away when he was fifteen.

LaSalle's trial went just as fast as Wentworth's and the jury seemed just as bored. Verdict: guilty. Sentence: one year in federal prison and a bad conduct discharge.

As LaSalle limped out of the courtroom our eyes met and I told him, "I'm sorry. I'll see what I can do on the outside."

"At least at LBJ [Long Binh Jail] the guards will give me all the dope I want," he said as the MPs took him away.

Later that evening I exploded at the Army lawyers. It was a mistake: most of them were just young draftees trying to do the best they could. I got friendly with two of them, both young whites from the Deep South, and found, surprisingly, that they hated both the war and the Army establishment. We killed a couple of bottles of Scotch and raked over Army justice.

"You know as well as I do that LaSalle should have been put in a hospital instead of jail," I told them. "With any effort at all, Wentworth should have gotten off with a notguilty."

"We had to go for a deal," said one. "If we fought, they would have given them five years."

He was right. If a private is charged with hitting a superior, guilty or not, to those seven lifers on the jury it is an open and shut case. And if a private acts like a smart-alec nigger instead of a contrite sinner, then he really gets it up the ass. The only hope the defense has is to plead guilty and hope for the best deal possible. So the courts plod along, going through the motions of meting out justice, but in fact upholding the Army's lifer system on an assembly-line basis.

Around two A.M. an old black lifer sergeant stumbled up to our group, drunk. "You know what?" he said, pointing a

weaving finger in my face. "Jesus Christ is coming back. And . I'll tellya something else. This time he is going to be black."

* %k ok

Binoctal, the drug on which LaSalle was hooked, was the . precursor of heroin, which had not yet appeared in South Vietnam in 1969. But grass was everywhere. Even the Army realized it had a drug problem and had set up its first drug . treatment program, the 98th Medical Detachment, at the giant Nha Trang base.

In August I decided to do a series on drugs. I went up to Nha Trang to meet Capt. John Moskovites, who had fought for and won brass approval for the new program because he believed it was a better way of dealing with addicts than " locking them up in Long Binh.

At least one soldier in II Corps had alrcady died from Binoctal, Moskovites told me, and three near-deaths had been

reported. Although it was a prescription drug, anyone could buy it over the counter at almost any Vietnamese pharmacy. The tablets are white and look like aspirin; they contain 50 mg of Amytal and 70 mg of Seconal. They cost about eight piasters for twenty tabs—enough to send a first-time user to the morgue. Vietnamese kids sold Binoctal to Gls at from one to five dollars for twenty tablets.

Moskovites invited me to sit in on a session with a helicopter gunner who was an addict. The gunner had threatened to kill a sergeant who refused to let him carry a certain weapon, and had been sent to Moskovites. Now, slumped in a chair, his oversized fatigue jacket unbuttoned, his eyes dark and sunken in his ashen face, the gunner looked like a man who had been on a booze bender for a week.

“I’m afraid I might kill myself,” he said. “I’'m nothing, nobody wants me.”

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“Come on now, we both know that’s not true, you’re here for a reason,” said Moskovites.

“Sir, please give me a reason. Help me. When I was here before I was happy.”

The soldier said he was only twenty years old. “I know I don’t look it, but that’s because of the drugs.”

Before coming to Vietnam he had been strongly antiwar. His heroes then were Bob Dylan and Mario Savio. Then he got into combat and found he liked killing. “I don’t know, maybe some people get a sexual thrill out of killing. I only

know that when I kill I get an exhilaration. ''m proud of the killing I''ve done." Slumping in his chair he added, "I think I'm a victim of the war."

Since coming to Vietnam he had grown to dislike the antiwar people. "The antiwar people say they're not against the GI, but they are. I'm willing to debate rationally with them, but they want nothing to do with me."

Moskovites, pleased that at least the soldier was talking freely, said to him: "You seem better already." The gunner smiled. "Wait, I'll drop some more, I've got fourteen left. Enough to really do a job on myself." He had already dropped more than one dozen Binoctal tabs (enough to kill a horse, said an Army psychiatrist later) and slowly, like a drunk reaching for his car keys, he looked into his pocket for the white pills. "I'm not going to give them up. I want to be numb. I have nothing to live for nothing to go back to. If wasn't numb all the time my anxiety would be so much that I'd go out of my mind. I've got nothing else. Right now they could press the button to annihilate us all and I wouldn't care.™

"Tomorrow is another day," Moskovites said. "But first we have to start by getting off that stuff. I do think you want help."

"Sure, I want help or I wouldn't be here," answered the soldier. He talked a little about his brother, who had died of

an overdose of heroin, and slowly reflected, "I want something better, but I can't find it."

“Well, tomorrow we’ll start,” said Moskovites.

“Of all the people who tried to help me I remember you ite best,” said-the gunner. “You know,” he added, “I'm really not a bad guy.”

Later a psychiatric corpsman who had worked closely with . the gunner described the second time he came to the clinic. “The guard with him was even more pathological than he was. On the way to the clinic, the guard stopped off at the local whorehouse to get a ‘piece.” He didn’t have any money and since he was so out of his gourd on drugs, the mama-san of the cathouse whaled on him with a sock full of sand. He had a huge black eye and was cut up real bad when we got him.”

One of the problems, said Moskovites, was that this soldier had started on drugs at fourteen or fifteen. “Now we have a once-bright guy who could be called a vegetable.”

[told Moskovites I smoked pot myself, and asked whether he had ever smoked it. He said he hadn’t, and brought out three Gls to show me some of the things pot had done to the troops in Vietnam.

The first was a young soldier who used to be a point man. He smoked pot because the “stress and strain was too much”; one day he led his unit into an ambush and three of his buddies were killed. He blamed himself for the death of the men and went into a deep depression.

The second was a combat medic, winner of the Bronze Star and three Purple Hearts, plus a recommendation for the Silver Star. “I would turn on from the minute I got up until I

went to bed. I was so corked out I couldn't even move. A baby-san [child] would bring me Cokes and joints, and I would sit in one place all day." Grass helped him in combat, he said. "If it wasn't for grass I would have blown my mind."

Ninety percent of his unit turned on, and a great many had "graduated' to mainlining opium.

The third was a whopper. Shotgunning one evening—inhaling through the nose while a buddy blew the smoke—he became paranoid. He went to his bunk, where he shook uncontrollably. "I found out too much in my mind. I thought I would die."

What he discovered, he said, was that the Chinese Communists were using pot as a device to subvert the U.S. Army.

Since he was the only one who knew of the plot, he was sure the Reds would kill him that night. "I thought even the dogs in the compound were Communists. They kept looking at me with their eyes. I thought about killing myself because I didn't want to be captured alive by the Chinese. I found out too much."

The young trooper was freaking out, muttering rapidly, his eyes darting around the room looking for the Chinese Communist dogs. Seventy percent of the men in his unit turned on, he said, but "Our officers can't do anything. If they busted all the guys, we wouldn't have anybody left in our unit." Officers, he said, don't even want to know that their men turn on and some even make a lot of noise when approaching a bunker to give the men time to stash their grass.

“Sometimes we get stoned with the officers, so we have them by the balls and they can’t report us.”

I asked him to introduce me to some of his “head” buddies. He took me outside the Medical Detachment office and we thumbed a ride on a truck to a distant part of the huge base. Out by the perimeter we found two of his buddies blowing grass on a pile of sandbags facing a maze of barbed wire. “Who in the fuck says war is hell, man,” said one GI handing me a joint. “This place is a head’s paradise.”

Ten fat joints cost sixty cents, the trooper said (they were going for ten dollars in the States). There were no problems with the “pigs” and Nha Trang had a nice beach. For a supGreen Machine 73

port troop, he told me, the war in Vietnam was paradise. At Nha Trang many of the troops had off-base apartments, complete with Vietnamese girls, Hondas, and all the opium they wanted—at one-hundredth of Stateside prices. Many of them were re-enlisting rather than face the grass famine plaguing America. Some were making ten or twenty times their Army salaries on the black market. For them, war certainly wasn’t hell.

At Nha Trang as elsewhere, he said, the units were divided between the heads and the black GIs on one side, and the lifers, the career soldiers, on the other.

“My commander says anyone who even admits to smoking grass should be thrown in jail. Yet he goes out every Saturday night, gets stinking drunk, gets into fights and pukes all over everybody,” said the soldier, filling his lungs with the potent

Nam pot. “They can drink their booze and I'll smoke my grass and we’ll both be happy.”

But the lifers weren’t content with this agreement, he said, so there would someday be war. “The revolution is coming. There is no way to stop it. Look at what’s happening in France, Latin America, even China. Our generation just isn’t going to take the same old shit. We’re going to fight.” Looking out at the barbed wire, his face pink from the glow of the joint, he mused: “The lifers are afraid of us and we’re afraid of the gooks. This place is going to blow, the only question is when. And when it does, every GI is going to have to take a stand. Either with us or with the lifers.”

The next morning I talked with the commander of the 98th Medical Detachment. Maj. Joel Kaplan was surprisingly candid. Army figures on the number of men who smoke pot simply weren’t true, he said. “The Army is hedging,” he told me. “We in fact have a tremendous drug problem in Vietnam. I have heard that between 50 and 80 percent of the GIs have turned on in Vietnam.”

Kaplan admitted he had a bigger problem with lifer

drunks, whom he called “juicers,” than with potheads. I think alcohol is a much more dangerous drug than marijuana,” he told me. Booze, he said, destroys not only the mind but also the body.

But juice and dope are only symptoms, just as “a cough can be a symptom of TB,” he said. “When life becomes so intolerable, as in the Army, a man may decide he can’t take

it, so he finds a new reality."

Later I talked to an SpS with a degree in psychology who had seen hundreds of patients during his tour as an aide in the psychiatric ward. Vietnam, he said, was a breeding ground for drug abusers. "War is not a natural experience. How much can a man take before his mind goes? Escaping the horrors of war by blowing your head is not new. Even in the Civil War soldiers dropped out by shooting morphine."

A decorated paratrooper recovering in the psycho ward put it to me another way. "There was titi [little] turning on in combat, but afterward either you got drunk out of your skull or blew your mind on grass—there was no other way."

Doc Hampton

After the disastrous battle of Hamburger Hill, GIs in the 101st Airborne put out an underground newspaper offering a $10,000 reward for the assassination of the officer who gave the order to attack.*

> * It was not unusual for bounties to be raised by troops in a unit to pay the soldier who actually did the fragging. Each soldier would chip in and bounties could come to hundreds, even thousands, of dollars.

Hamburger Hill was a big story in the press, but the reward wasn't, nor were the fraggings that began to occur in increasing numbers in '69. Later the Army was to admit that there had been more than two hundred known fraggings in 1969. In 1970 there were 363 reported

cases. Who knows how many more officers were shot by their own men in combat?

Although many of us in the Saigon press corps had heard rumors of fraggings—attacks by enlisted men on officers with a fragmentation grenade, usually slipped under the floor of the officer's hootch--it wasn't being reported to the people back home.

Then-President Lyndon Johnson, in response to the growing antiwar movement, once said, "You don't hear the boys in Vietnam protesting." Hawks consistently called for escalation '"to support our boys." To be against the war, they claimed, is to stab Gls in the back. The Army brass was particularly worried about stories of GI unrest leaking out. They did everything they could to cover it up, and until 1969 they were successful.

They covered up the story of the revolt in 1968 of black Gls at Long Binh Jail, the notorious Army prison outside Saigon. Fed up with abuse and beatings at the hands of the guards, black troops seized the prison, repelling successive attempts by hundreds of MPs backed up by armored cars to retake the prison. In the end, of course, the troops lost out.

The easiest way for the Army to cover up news of GI unrest was simply not to report it at the five o'clock follies. The Army's massive PR machine daily cranked out press releases about how the Gls supported the war, how high their morale was and how we were gloriously winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people.

So the press simply never heard of the fraggings, of officers

shot in the back by their own men, of near-revolts of whole units. Most of the newsmen, when they did go out in the field, spent their time in the officers' mess and in officers' clubs drinking with the brass. It seemed most newsmen didn't really like or understand the grunts; they felt more comfortable with the lifers.

Besides, most of the grunts didn't trust the Saigon press corps. They knew the Army's Central Intelligence Division (CID) often sent agents onto bases disguised as newsmen to get information and evidence about fraggings or possible mutinies. El Cid, as the grunts called the spies, was everywhere.

But there was another, even greater, obstacle to uncovering stories of fraggings. If a reporter wanted to go on base, he had to sign up for a military flight, giving the reason for his trip. If he told the truth and said he wanted to do a story about fraggings, the brass would try to block him every way they could-—-say he couldn't get to the base because of bad weather or, if they did let him go, send along a public information officer to follow him around and make sure no

damaging information got out. If he lied about why he wanted to go, they would still make sure he saw and heard only what the PIO wanted.

The Overseas Weekly was the first paper to report on fraggings, probably because most of our stories came from the GIs themselves. On stories the Army didn't want us to know about—and there were many-we usually had to sneak on base to get the story at all.

One day in August Ann Bryan got a call from some troops at Cu Chi, headquarters of the 25th Division, who said they had a story for us. She made an arrangement for me to meet them secretly on the base.

The streets at Cu Chi had beautiful names—Maui Street and Oahu Street—but they were very drab. Behind a pizza parlor two GIs were waiting. I identified myself and we drove down the street, past the massage parlor where GIs got a five-dollar hand job.

“I think we got a safe place to meet,” said one of the GIs.

It was very risky for them to talk with me, because if they were caught they would probably be shipped to Firebase Jackson the next day. Jackson. they said, was a place they didn’t want to be.

They took me to a small hootch. About eight GIs, half of them black and half of them white, were sitting on the floor when we entered. While they took turns watching for lifers outside. the GIs slowly began to tell me the story of two men.

“I guess I’ll start by telling you about Doc—-Sp4 Enoch ‘Doc’ Hampton,” said a sandy-haired soldier, Sp4 W. C. Benn. “Doc was our friend, everybody liked Doc. He was a real good medic.”

“Yeah, he never bothered nobody,” said another soldier. “He treated people like you would want to be treated.”

They talked about Doc for a while, then they told me about the other man, Sfc. Clarence Lowder, whom they called “Top.” Things started to get bad, they said, when Top

came into the unit as the new “first-shirt,” or top sergeant. Top didn’t think much of the new ‘“Action Army.” It was too soft. “He wished he was back in the old army,” said Pfc. Rich Hanusey, a clerk in the orderly room. In the old days, Top would tell his men, he could straighten out a soldier “without going through a bunch of legal mumbo-jumbo.”

Top was a big, powerful man and many GIs were afraid of him. “Top would threaten to hit people or send them to Jackson,” said Hanusey.

Firebase Jackson was like a death sentence. Some of the GIs doubted Top had enough power to send a man there, but nobody wanted to test him.

“He treated us like machines,” said one GI. “I’m not a robot, I’m a human being.”\ Instead of loading supplies on a truck, Top would make the men walk and carry the stuff all the way. He liked to belittle men in front of others. “He had no respect for people,” Benn said.

“He was disappointed being here,” said Hanusey, who had worked with Top and knew him better than most of the enlisted men. ‘“He would have been a great first sergeant in training, the kind they use to scare trainees. But over here he was creating a fiasco.”

Top once ordered a private to dig a six-foot ditch. The soldier dug a six-foot peace symbol in the ground. “That really blew Top’s mind,” said Hanusey. After that Top worked on the Pfc almost constantly for six weeks. The Pfc got stoned every night and dreamed about killing Top. “That man isn’t going to live through the day,” he would shout.

Finally, the Pfc cracked and was shipped out.
One non-commissioned officer in the unit used to shake and drink heavily after his encounters with Top. “One night Top almost made him cry,” said one of the GIs. Another

time the NCO threatened to kill Top and had to be restrained.
After his second week in the unit, Top got a warning from his men—a CS gas grenade under his hootch. “When they put gas on you, yeah, you know they mean you no good,” said one of the men with a smile.
Benn, the Sp4 who had started the story, began to be afraid that someone might kill Top. “He didn’t deserve to die. We just wanted him out.” So Benn went to the battery commander, but the commander refused to believe any soldier would go that far. Then Benn went to the inspector general. ‘I just got a patronizing look,” he said. “Lifers are still battering down drawbridges. They haven’t entered the twentieth century.”
Benn even went to the chaplain, who told him things weren’t ‘“as bad as all that” and advised him to go back through the chain of command.
A few weeks later one non-com urged Top to go to the enlisted men’s club and have a few beers with the men. Top refused. When the NCO warned Top he was pushing his men too hard and might get zapped, Top reportedly fired back,

“Not one of them would have the guts.”

They didn’t hate Top, the men in the hootch told me; they thought he was a victim of the system, just like them. He just didn’t know what was going on in Vietnam, or he wouldn’t have said, “Not one of them would have the guts.” He hadn’t been in Vietnam long enough, he didn’t know that in some parts of Vietnam war existed between the grunts and the lifers.

It was just about this time that the black Gls in Top’s units were beginning to think about the war, beginning to tell themselves that if they had to die they wanted to die for a cause of their own choice. To many of them the lifer sergeant was more of an enemy than the Asian peasant soldier outside the wire. There was also a different kind of white soldier in

the unit, like the private who dug the six-foot peace symbol. Young white soldiers smoked grass, wore beads, and flashed the peace sign as a standard greeting. In the evenings, black and white troops would get together, blow grass, and rap. The heads and the blacks, the men in the hootch told me, were beginning to get it together. I remembered what one of the doper Gls had told me at Nha Trang: “The lifers are more i afraid of what’s in this camp than what’s outside it.”

After about two months with the unit, Top started " harassing Doc Hampton about his Afro haircut, telling him to get it cut. Doc’s hair was no longer than an inch and a half —within Army regulations—but Top kept pushing him to

trim it.

At the mess hall one evening, Doc said that Top had “his thing,” the book and the law, and that he, Doc, had his—an M-16 rifle. Doc said he was going to the orderly room to see the first sergeant, “Either I'll come out alone,” he said, “or neither of us is coming out.”

Hanusey, the clerk, was working in the orderly room when Doc came through the doorway. “His face was cold, stone cold,” Hanusey said. “He looked like a man in the movies who was about to kill.”

The barrel of Doc’s M-16 was pointed downward, his feet planted firmly apart. Slowly he raised the barrel and fired a full clip into Top. The sergeant’s back exploded as pieces of flesh and blood spattered all over the orderly room. Then Doc walked out.

Hanusey couldn’t believe it, almost thinking Doc was firing ";,, blanks until he heard the empty shell casings hit the floor. It just didn’t seem real. Then the captain screamed, “Stop ! him.” Hanusey just looked down at Top, heard him groan and saw him move his head slightly, and then Top was dead.

Benn was outside when he saw Doc running for a bunker, “like a deer being chased.” Suddenly there were about forty

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MPs and other men with shotguns and submachine guns running

after Doc, shouting, '"Get him, kill him."

"The chase after Doc was like a hunt, he didn't have a chance," said another GI.

The lifers cornered Doc in an empty bunker. But Doc was armed; nobody wanted to go in after him. It was a standoff. Taking up positions around the bunker, the lifers ordered him to surrender.

"I wasn't going to let it happen," said Ben Denson, a black g soldier who hadn't spoken before. "If they shot Doc, there was going to be a slaughter, a bloodletting. There would have been a war." When black troops in the unit started going for their weapons, they saw that there were many whites with them.

As white and black troops started running out of their huts and bunkers towards Doc, they were blocked by armed MPs. "They wanted to gun him down and didn't want anyone to stop it," said Denson. Both sides were lining up for a confrontation and when the black and white troops trying to save Doc looked around, there were more of them than there were lifers.

Then a single shot sounded in Doc's bunker. One lifer started to make a move for the bunker, but was stopped by black troops. Two black soldiers went in. Doc Hampton was dead.

Denson had a theory about why Doc Hampton shot himself. "It was his last protest. He didn't want to be killed by his oppressors."

Hampton and Lowder became statistics in the new war,

but to the GIs in his unit, Doc was a hero, a martyr to the cause of freedom. I will remember Doc all my life and I will dedicate myself to keeping his memory," said Benn.

In the days following the shooting, the battery area was

tense. "The lifers ran around," said Benn, "with their private arsenal of shotguns to use against us." "There was a scrimmage line, us and them," Denson added. The battery commander gave a ''eulogy' for Doc which infuriated the men.

He called Doc "this boy," and implied Doc was crazy. "Some eulogy," stormed Denson. "They attacked his character."

"Hampton didn't kill the sergeant," said Denson. "There was a crime, but these two men were killed by the hierarchy."

Top, he said, was just a poor guy doing the establishment's dirty work.

"I blame the IG [Inspector General] and the commander," added Benn. "Top had a lot of good in him but they pushed him too far."

"There was nothing wrong with Doc," said Denson, still angry about the commander's statement that Doc was crazy; "he just got pushed too far." Doc, Denson said, was no different from thousands of other black GIs who had taken a hard look at what they saw in Vietnam and didn't like it.

"We're not winning the war in the glorious way we are hearing about—it's the biggest farce I've ever seen."

Just before we broke up, Benn told me about seeing an American intelligence officer, an "average Joe," question two Vietnamese, husband and wife. When the man refused to

talk, said Benn, the officer threw the wife out of the chopper while in flight. “That’s what the war does to people’s minds,” he said.

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By the time I got back it was late, so Benn found me a place to sleep, sharing a hootch with a young soldier who was living by himself.

“Do you want a J?” he asked.

“Sure,” I answered, and he handed me a filter-tip joint.

“How did you get your own place?” I asked.

“They keep me away from the others.”

‘CWhy?’,

Doc Hampton 83

“They don’t want to fuck with me, they think I''m crazy.”

“Do you have a job?”

“No, I don’t do much, just watch this place all day . ..

“Do you want to hear some of my poems?” he offered like a school kid. All his poems were about death.

That night he told me a story: I was stoned that day. I was riding on an APC [armored personnel carrier] with my best buddy. We were just bullshitting, up on top. He was making a gesture with his hands. I was looking at his hands, and his head just disappeared. His hand was still outstretched, like this, but his head was gone. Then I felt something wet all over me, but you know, his hand was still out like this.” He stared at his outstretched hand.

Next morning I walked into the orderly room and asked to see the battery commander, Capt. Robert Haney. The men

stopped talking and the clerks stopped typing as I walked in.
“I think your newspaper is a rag and I’m not going to write your stories for you,” Haney told me over a cup of coffee at the officers’ mess.
“Captain,” I said, “I’ve got statements of thirteen men who saw what happened to Lowder and Hampton. I would like your side of the story.”
Haney was startled to learn that I had sneaked on base, interviewed his men and slept in his battery area without his knowing it. He became more cordial and agreed to answer my questions.
“It was a great surprise when I found out who had done it,” he said, adding that Doc was the last man in the unit he would have expected to gun down Lowder. He admitted that the men had talked to him about Top, but added, “It never occurred to me something like this would happen. It is a trend, a part of a worldwide rebellion against authority.” The Army, he said, had the same problems, generated by the rebellious attitudes of young people, as people had back

home—“but we are going to take care of our problems.”
“I didn’t care for the way the battery had been run,” Haney commented. ‘“Individuals were not meeting Army standards in dress and in the way they looked.” Doc’s haircut, he said, ‘“didn’t conform.” He said Doc “appeared to be intelligent,” but must have had “a lapse of reasoning.”
Haney thought for a moment, then asked me, “Do you think a haircut should cost a man’s life?”

I tried to tell him some of the things his men had told me -that some of the GIs wanted to decide what it was they were going to die for. I told him I thought Doc Hampton had made his decision: the lifers were more his enemy than the Vietcong.

Haney recoiled at the word “lifer.” “I don’t like to be called a lifer,” he said. “We are career soldiers; it is a patriotic calling.”

Of everything that was said to me by Doc’s friends at Cu Chi, something one of them said at the end of the evening stuck in my mind. He said it in a very matter-of-fact way, not as a boast or a threat but almost calmly:

“If they fuck with us they are going to die.”

Revolt of Alpha Company

Doc Hampton was not alone. All over Vietnam, GIs were fragging their officers and their lifer noncoms. On some patrols, if a lifer was too ‘“gung ho,” he was shot in the back by his men, who would report he was killed in combat. More often, a unit ordered to go on patrol would simply go a few hundred yards beyond the wire and then sit down and smoke dope. I had been on one such patrol but for obvious reasons hadn’t reported it.

In many units, the men had virtual control, either by intimidation or by having non-lifers in command. In some places it was more like open warfare, with the heads and black troops on one side and the lifers on the other.

Rumors of troops quitting in combat were everywhere, but until September 1969 nothing could be verified —newsmen never happened to be in the right place at the right time. Then, during the battle for Queson, came the revolt of Alpha Company.

The battle for Queson started when the North Vietnamese Army launched a powerful offensive against the Americal Division guarding the northern coastal region of South Vietnam. The battle was a meatgrinder, with each side pouring in its best battalions to be chewed up. Alpha Company had been in the worst of it, the fight for AK Valley.

For four days Alpha Company had assaulted the same North Vietnamese bunker system, and each time they suffered high casualties. Then the commander of the battalion

and Ollie Noonan of AP, with whom I had flown into Ben Het, were shot down in a helicopter over the AK Valley and Alpha Company was ordered in to find their bodies.

The next day Lt. Col. Robert C. Bacon, the new battalion commander, ordered the company again to storm the North Vietnamese bunkers. Two newsmen, Peter Arnett and Horst Fass of Associated Press, were with Bacon at his battalion headquarters at Landing Zone Center when a call came in. A nervous voice crackled over the radio receiver: it was Lt. Eugene Schurtz, Jr., the commander of Alpha Company: “I''m sorry, sir, but my men refused to go ... We cannot move out.” Bacon turned pale and fired back into his radio

phone: “Repeat that, please. Have you told them what it means to disobey orders under fire?”

“I think they understand,” said the lieutenant, ‘“but some of them have simply had enough they are broken. There are boys here who have only ninety days left in Vietnam. They want to go home in one piece. The situation is psychic here.”

Bacon ordered his executive officer, Maj. Richard Waite, and Sfc. Okey Blankenship to “go out there and give them a pep talk and a kick in the ass.” When they got there, Schurtz was crying, and the men poured out details of their five terror-filled days.

Blankenship told the men that another company, down to only fifteen men (‘I lied to them,” he admitted later), was still on the move. An Alpha troop asked why, and the sarge sneered in contempt: ‘“Maybe they got something a little more than you’ve got.” With fists raised, the enraged soldier charged, shouting, “Don’t call us cowards, we are not cowards.”

Somehow Waite and Blankenship managed to convince Alpha Company that the NVA had already left the bunkers (apparently this was true), and the men moved out.

The revolt of an American unit was being reported all over America, and it was big news. Even the Stars and Stripes

reported the story. It would have looked bad for the Army to ignore it. Every GI in Vietnam who had ever considered opting out of the war must have been waiting anxiously for what followed. Would the Army throw the men of Alpha in Long

Binh Jail—or would they let them get away with it? Or did they have something else in mind, something worse than LBJ or Leavenworth?

I heard about the revolt while covering the battle of Que-son with the Marines, who were coming to the aid of the bloodied Americal Division. Jumping on an Army two-seat observation chopper, I got a ride to battalion headquarters at Landing Zone Center.

When I arrived, Lieutenant Colonel Bacon, standing with his hands on his hips, was talking to the forty GIs of Alpha Company:

"Men, you have done a good job," he said.

A black GI, also with his hands on his hips, was facing Bacon. Behind him, forty more men stared at the officer. One of the men was Pvt. John Broskoff, one of the veterans of the company, a veteran of two months. Broskoff was the last man left from the squad he had joined two months ago. He had just come out of hell. When I talked to him later, he told me he had been so hungry he had eaten the bark off trees: his thirst was so bad he'd licked the sweat off his own body. At AK Valley the North Vietnamese had so many .51 caliber anti-aircraft guns the helicopters couldn't bring in supplies. One C-ration carton might have to be shared by two men for a day. Humping through a spiderweb of jungle with forty- or fifty-pound loads, the men of Alpha Company were near exhaustion. The North Vietnamese troops seemed to be everywhere, Broskoff said. They would pop out of holes, cut down a squad, then duck back in.

Alpha Company never saw an NVA troop until it was too late. After five days, Alpha Company existed only on paper. The company had forty-nine men left, little more than a

platoon. They weren't even a platoon, Broskoff told me, just forty-nine men trying to stay alive one day at a time. Most of them had raw, oozing scabs that festered in the rotting jungle. Some had heat rash that spread in red, crusty blotches all over the body. Nearly all had crotch rot.

Then came Bacon's order to attack the bunkers again.

Now Lieutenant Colonel Bacon was talking to the men of Alpha Company. But something strange was happening. Instead of threatening them with prison, Bacon was praising them. He continued talking in a dull monotone. A light rain had begun to fall and the thunder of artillery fire sounded in the distance—towards AK Valley, where a fierce battle was raging. There was something worse than jail, and the men of Alpha Company could hear it: AK Valley. Delta Company was in trouble and somebody was going to be sent in to take those NVA bunkers.

"... and you men are going to get a three-day standdown," concluded Bacon.

Something strange was happening. Instead of being sent back into AK Valley, or to jail, Alpha Company was getting three days of rest, food, and sleep. Three more days of life. Bacon dismissed the men. Overhead I could hear a flight of jets coming in for an airstrike in AK Valley. Bacon told me Delta Company was pinned down and he was going to send in

Bravo Company to relieve the pressure.

In about an hour a helicopter landed and about a dozen lifers ran over to the small pad to meet it. Out stepped Maj. Gen. Lloyd Ramsey, commander of the Americal Division, sporting a green baseball cap with two stars on it. Ramsey quickly went into a huddle with Bacon and a captain who had replaced Schurtz. Bacon seemed very nervous. After a few moments I went over and asked the general for a statement on the revolt of Alpha Company.

“It was a slight ripple on the water--it was settled in a few moments. The whole thing was blown out of proportion. Ask

me if I want to go into combat and I'll answer no. But I damn well will go. You tell a soldier something and he may not want to go—but by God, he will go, and he’ll do the finest job in the world.”

Ramsey compared the whole thing to a football game. “A fullback may try to hit the center of the line and be clobbered. Back in the huddle he will tell the quarterback, ‘I can’t hit there again, I'll be killed.” But the quarterback doesn’t go running to the coach, he simply calls time out to discuss the problem.”

The GIs in Vietnam, Ramsey went on, were the “best soldiers we ever had. I fought in World War Il for three and a half years, but I'll take these men. They are real red-blooded Americans, and I’m proud as hell; right down through the ranks, they did a magnificent job.” Morale, he said, was

“great, amazing.”

Was Alpha’s revolt really a “slight ripple on the water,” or was it the beginning of a tidal wave? I wanted to find out for myself, so I asked Bacon for permission to go with Bravo Company into AK Valley. Bacon refused. His exec, Waite, took me aside and said, “I’m sorry, but we can’t let you go down there.”

“Is there something you don’t want me to see?”

“It’s very bad down there. If you go, you are asking to get yourself killed.”

I asked to call brigade to get permission. About fifteen minutes before the men of Bravo Company boarded the helicopters to begin their mission, I got word that I could go with them.

The men were tense and nervous as the helicopters neared the landing zone. “Please let it be cold,” whispered a man in my chopper. It was a cold landing there was no enemy fire.

That evening we climbed down the side of a mountain, beginning the descent into AK Valley. We could go only halfway down before it became too dark to move any

farther, so we camped. Next morning we got the word to move back up the ridge. The men grumbled as they trudged back up the mountain, cursing the lifers and asking why they were being moved around like pawns on a chess board.

Back up on top of the ridge, Capt. Ron Cooper gathered his company and told them the bad news. Bravo Company was going to lead the assault on the main Communist bunkers.

Alpha Company, which had been promised a three-day rest, was going back into combat after only two days. Alpha would support Bravo in the attack.

The men of Bravo Company passed around a news clipping about the revolt of Alpha Company. They talked a lot about the revolt. As helicopters flew in bringing Alpha Company, the men of Bravo flashed the two-finger peace symbol, an almost-universal enlisted man's salute in Vietnam. The chopper gunners flashed the sign back as they dropped down. Even Captain Cooper held up two fingers as the Cobra thrashed overhead.

The men of Alpha Company looked bitter as they trudged past the men of Bravo. "I wouldn't say anything to those guys if I were you, I'll bet they sure are pissed off about being back out here," muttered the Bravo radio man, Sp4 Robert Munson. The two ranks of men stared at each other as Alpha Company filed past.

Looking down into the valley, the men of Alpha Company could see what they were about to face. They could hear the North Vietnamese .51-caliber machine guns dueling with the Cobra gunships. Alpha Company's mission was to take a hill honeycombed with NVA bunkers.

As they waited for the order to move in, the men of Bravo stopped their joking and wisecracks. "The only way I"m going to ever leave this place is in a plastic bag," said Munson, who was only eighteen.

After the last Alpha Company troop walked past, Bravo got the word to move in. The closer the men got to the

steady thuds of artillery bursts, the more bitter they became. They took a last look at the battalion officers watching the battle from a ridgeline higher up the mountain. “Those patriots are trying to get us all killed,” sneered Pfc. Paul Snodgrass. ‘“Tell the people back in the world to keep up their protests. Tell them we all support them.”

The hot sun beat down on their backs and beads of sweat dripped off their faces. A young machine gunner, belts of ammo crisscrossed over his chest, vowed he would quit then and there if not for the fear of going to Long Binh Jail. “I wouldn’t even mind doing two years, but they would probably send me right back here after doing my time.” He expressed the thought that has kept others from rebelling—time in Army jail is not counted as time in the service, and the Army can send a man right back into combat after he gets out.

“Men, you ain’t getting enough body count,” said a staff sergeant sarcastically.

“Yeah, that’s all the bastards are after, body count,” said one of the GIs.

Many of the men in the company wore peace symbols, and nearly all had something written on their helmets. “Re-up, I’d rather throw up,” read one.

Unlike the Korean or Australian units in South Vietnam, which kept strict silence in combat, the men of Bravo kept up a stream of chatter all along the line. American infantry units, with transistor radios playing, Pepsi cans clanging, and

a running dialogue going on, can often be heard for miles. Maybe the men know what they're doing: Any NVA troops can hear them and clear out.

"Stick close to me," said a powerfully built black soldier. His name was Allen Robinson and he was always making jokes about the brass and the war. I didn't know it at the time but he was one of the '"old-timers" of the unit.

The heat was getting unbearable, my feet were throbbing

and I was drenched with sweat. A reddish rash was spreading on my arm, the first signs of jungle rot. We stopped; I thought we must be breaking for lunch, but it was only ten o'clock and we were taking a five-minute break.

"You can ask any of these guys and they'll tell you the Army sucks," Robinson said, looking around at his squad sprawled along the jungle path. Army body-count figures were just plain bullshit, he said. Since the battle started, his company had lost five and had twenty-four wounded. "We didn't even see a dink." The Army reported nine hundred NVA killed, but none of the men believed it.

Others said that every time they took a hill, the NVA simply moved back in after they left. Sometimes they would fight for the same worthless and battered ground several times, each time making another payment in blood.

The squad was ordered to saddle up and move, and the men began to bitch about it. "Stick around, you may get a bigger story than you expected," said Robinson as we started to move out again. "Someday we're going to get together and

all of us are going to say we aren't going. The only thing that is stopping us now is Long Binh Jail, but if we all stick together, they can't lock us all up."

"Right on," said another.

That evening we reached the floor of the valley. There was still no contact, although some of our own artillery rounds came in very close. Bravo and Alpha companies set up camp on a high mound overlooking the North Vietnamese bunker system. Some of the Bravo troops began talking about the assault on those North Vietnamese bunkers scheduled for the next day.

Captain Cooper came over and joined the circle. "Hiya, Coop," said one of the men. Munson, the radio man, took a boxing stance and pretended to hit the captain: "You wanna take a picture of us kicking the shit out of the captain?"

Cooper sat down and we continued talking. "He knows

. what it's like out here, not those generals and colonels with their grid maps and grease pencils," said Munson. "There are no lifers out here."

Like them, Cooper was in the Army because he had no choice, and like them he had no love for the war. He didn't care about "body count" or about "making major." All he

. wanted was to get as many people out alive as he could. The men didn't salute him or call him "Sir." "We're all on a first-name basis out here," he told me.

I was just finishing my dinner (my last C-ration, a can of peaches) when I heard the first ping over my head. Then

there was another, and another. Men were scrambling for cover everywhere. A guy was running, shouting, “Snipers,” but he quickly fell. Nobody could see where the shooting was coming from, but whoever was shooting was getting close. It happened so fast I didn’t have time to be scared; I just dropped and hugged the ground, knowing that while we were huddled there, a sniper had us in his sights.

' Cooper was on the radio and within seconds the whoosh of our artillery fire was heard, followed by the dull thud of the . explosion. Within minutes, the North Vietnamese positions were covered with dust.

Under artillery fire, the re-supply chopper was trying to make a dash for our camp, coming in low and fast. Just as it neared us, tracers from North Vietnamese anti-aircraft guns came arching up from the valley. The chopper slammed into the ground, lifted a little, and hovered while the men franti-cally grabbed supplies; within seconds it was off, flying through the orange golf balls that sailed through the air.

Like birds of prey, a flock of gunships looking for the sources of the anti-aircraft fire came swooping in, firing i rockets and machine guns. We dug into the hard earth to escape the flying bullets from the NVA guns and the Cobras. \ We were caught in the crossfire.

Maybe I had hoped that when we got there in the morning

the North Vietnamese would be gone, but when I saw the tracers from their ack-ack guns, I knew they were still out there, waiting. £

Sleep that night was difficult. The red ants were everywhere and their bite hurt worse than a bee sting, leaving large red itchy welts. My body ached and I was exhausted, but I couldn't sleep. Artillery fire peppered the NVA positions all night and for several hours the lonesome wail of the Spooky gunship was audible. Spooky's eerie whine finally lulled me off to sleep.

I woke up when Cooper touched my shoulder: "We're moving out." It was still dark, and a grey fog hung low in the valley. The company of men, strung out for hundreds of yards, inched their way through the mist and into the valley toward the waiting North Vietnamese. As the men got closer, their muscles tensed and their joking stopped.

The North Vietnamese tactics were simple. They would dig into concealed bunkers along a line, wait for the point men to walk within feet of them, then open up with everything they had. Hidden in rabbit holes interconnected by an underground network of tunnels, the NVA troops would let the Americans walk past and then hit them from behind with long-handled grenades called potato mashers. Inside the American lines the North Vietnamese would ambush squads from behind, creating panic, while the front would be raked with interlocking machine-gun fire and pounded by mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. When the Americans fell back they would be cut to pieces by the concealed enemy troops. At Queson, entire American companies were wiped out in this fashion: the few who managed to get out never saw one North Vietnamese soldier. Yet the grunts kept coming back,

kept walking into the mouths of the North Vietnamese guns, day after day, week after week, retaking the same ground. “This has to be insanity,” said the platoon leader as we neared the North Vietnamese bunkers.

Revolt of Alpha Company 97

We stopped about a hundred yards from the North Vietnamese positions. Waiting for half an hour, we became tense and edgy--why can’t we get it over with? One of the men looked at Cooper, pleading: “I don’t want to go in there. It’s going to be hairy.” Cooper looked back: “I know it’s going . to be hairy, but I know what I'm doing.”

Bravo Company had been in some bad action earlier in the battle for AK Valley and once the outfit had been surrounded on three sides by North Vietnamese. They were about to be wiped out when Cooper called in an airstrike almost over their heads. It was a gamble but it worked, and the company, though badly mauled, was saved. The men trusted Cooper to do whatever was necessary to get them out of a jam. They hated lifers, but they didn’t look on Cooper as a lifer he was one of them. If the unit moved at all it was because of Cooper, not because of the lifers on the hills with their binoculars.

“He saved our asses last time and every one of us knows it. We’re sticking with him,” said Munson.

Cooper got the word over the radio. Bravo was to be held back and Alpha Company was going in first. There was something worse than Long Binh Jail and the Army had found it.

The men of Alpha Company walked past the men of

Bravo, sprawled along the sides of the jungle path. “Those poor bastards,” said one of the Bravo troops crouched next to me.

This might be the day, I thought, that the chessmen came alive, the day the football team hangs the coach. Like Hitler moving imaginary Panzer divisions in the last days of World War I1, the generals at headquarters were moving line companies that existed merely on paper. Understrength, exhausted from lack of food, from days of heat and humping through the jungle, fed up and disgusted with the war, they were no longer the fighting force imagined by the generals.

. The distinctive rapping sound of an AK-47 slashed through

the foliage like an invisible sickle cutting weeds. The eighty men of the company were strung out over about a hundred yards, and I couldn’t see anyone except the guy next to me, who was trying to lie as flat as possible. We could hear a lot of fire but couldn’t see anything. Although there were eighty men, only the point men were firing -the others were afraid of hitting their own troops. I crawled on my hands and knees to Bravo’s point man to try to find out what was happening. There, two GIs were lying behind a small mound.

“Alpha Company got ambushed. Dinks came from every- ° where. They’re bringing in a Medevac now for the dead and 4 wounded.”

The dustoff chopper came in right over our heads as three or four North Vietnamese .51-caliber machine guns opened up on it. The chopper made it through, picked up the casualties,

and took off again through the flak. AK fire kicked up the dust in front of us and I crouched back, laying my head flat against the ground. I looked up again and it sounded as if the chopper had been hit. The engine sputtered and it was losing altitude fast. “Come on, baby, pick it up, pick it up,” prayed the GI to my left. The engine picked up and the chopper droned off, out of range of NVA fire.

There were squads of North Vietnamese popping up behind us as we started to pull back under grueling enemy fire. There was no strategy any more, simply bands of scared i men cut off from their comrades trying to kill other groups of scared men.

A squad from Alpha was ambushed by a North Vietnamese who popped up from his hole, threw a potato masher and ducked back down. Another Alpha squad gave chase and cornered him. There was a brief exchange of fire; when I got there, the North Vietnamese was dead.

Throughout the engagement the other side had been faceless. Now we saw one. He looked just like us. He wore a greyish-green uniform, a pith helmet like the British Army

helmet in the Boer War, and a gas mask. He was well equipped; probably he was from one of the main-line NVA regiments. The grunts were going through his pockets for souvenirs. His brains were oozing from a gash in his forehead. One GI kicked the gash and more brains squeezed out.

There was no time to look for more souvenirs because there was more heavy NVA fire coming from the right flank.

All along the line American troops were pulling back, some limping.

“I’’ve got to have air now,” Cooper shouted into his radio.

“We’re getting out of here,” he said to his radio man, who grinned. The company pulled back about two hundred yards, quickly but orderly, as the Phantom jets came roaring in overhead.

The men plugged their ears with their fingers and the deafening roar of the five-hundred-pound bombs shattered the valley. The ground shook and giant hunks of shrapnel whipped through the air as wave after wave of fighter bombers pounded the North Vietnamese positions. One slight miscalculation, a minor pilot error, and we would all be blown apart by a five-hundred-pounder. We just slumped back hugging the earth, jammed our fingers in our cars, and prayed.

After the airstrike Cooper pulled his men back, managing to get everyone out alive. Alpha Company wasn’t as lucky. One man had been killed and three wounded. They were happy to be wounded they’d be taken out of combat.

It was Thursday and I had to file my story by Friday, so I decided to grab the re-supply chopper for Chu Lai, the division headquarters. I said good-bye sadly to the men of Bravo and Alpha companies. Again, the men asked me to tell everybody back home what was really happening.

“Tell the people we are not winning this war in the glorious way they tell everybody,” Robinson said. “The NVA is kicking our ass. I don’t even enjoy shooting dinks any more. just try to stay alive one more day. I don’t care, just as long

as I make it home. They say we are fighting for a great cause. Bullshit; we're just fighting to stay alive."

The men of Alpha and Bravo companies were no different from any other troops. As Robinson said, they were not fighting for a great cause, they were just trying to stay alive. They felt their government was lying to them, that they were simply pawns in somebody else's game. Some soldiers took their frustration out in violence, like Doc Hampton. But most just tried to survive. If a lifer pushed too hard, he died. Otherwise there was a truce.

[was sure there would have been open revolt by the troops in Vietnam if not for one thing: each grunt knew he had only one year to do. He had to weigh a sure five years in prison against trying to get by for one year in Vietnam. For support troops, the decision was easier: Vietnam wasn't such a bad place. But a grunt stood a good chance of getting killed or screwed up for life. A very good chance. The grunt counted off days on the calendar until he reached the magic 365. If a combat zone was quiet, the grunt could just wait it out and hope to do his time. Some began to go crazy toward the end.

Queson was the last big World War II-type battle fought by entire American divisions. A short time after I left AK Valley the battle subsided. If what I saw of Alpha and Bravo companies was any indication of how other units of the Americal Division felt, after a few more weeks at the same intensity, battalions or even whole regiments might have quit. General Giap was attempting again to drive to the sea and

cut Vietnam in two. The Americans had encountered Giap's troops earlier in 1969 at Hamburger Hill in the Au Shau Valley campaign. Now Giap had nearly reached the sea. His troops mauled the Americal Division so badly that the American high command threw in an entire division of Marines to hit the North Vietnamese from the north. If Giap could have kept up his offensive only a few more weeks, he might have

reached the sea, splitting the Americal Division from the Marines. The entire Americal Division might even have collapsed—and that might have brought about a huge upheaval in Congress. But Giap took heavy losses, and his offensive sputtered. I wanted to get into combat with his troops, but there were no reporters on the North Vietnamese side.

I did a few joints in the helicopter as it neared Chu Lai, so I was really stoned when I was met by a young lieutenant of the public information section, who suggested I have a drink with him. "You look bushed," he said.

I was still stoned when we reached the officers' club. To a background of piped 1950s-type music, a beautiful cocktail waitress brought me a Black Russian. The officers' club—swank, lit by torches—looked out over the foaming surf of the Pacific crashing against the cliffs below.

The lieutenant smelled of after-shave lotion. At the next table, an attractive nurse daintily holding a cigarette chatted with a colonel who was hacking apart a huge red lobster.

"Would you like some steak tonight?" asked the lieutenant.

"I feel sick," I told him. "I'm sorry, but I've got to get out

bl here,”

I walked along the beach, watching the sun dip into the Pacific. The Army in Vietnam, I said to myself, was one big corporation. The guys at the top had it great, but for the people at the bottom it was not so good. Most grunts in the Americal Division couldn’t even buy beer because they were under age.

Ramsey wanted to keep his football game going. But he didn’t have to hump a machine gun in the 120-degree heat, eat the bark off trees, lick his own sweat, see his crotch a mass of oozing red pus, count off the days like a man serving a prison term, watch his buddies die.

When I returned to the officers’ club to check my flight there was a movie on the screen.

“Hey, man, what’s the flick?” I asked a colonel.

“The Green Berets.”

Bu Prang

After I wrote up the story of Alpha Company, I went to Laos for a holiday, caught dysentery, and ended up recuperating in the Third Field Hospital in Saigon. I was the only civilian in the ward at the time, and Thom Marlowe, another freelancer, was making life bearable for me by sneaking in a few Craven “A” joints every day. (Craven “A” and Park Lane were the two main varieties of grass in Saigon. The grass came neatly packed in prerolled cigarettes inside genuine Craven

“A” and Park Lane packs.)

One day, along with the grass, Thom brought me some news. The North Vietnamese were launching a big offensive in the southern part of the Central Highlands; they had already attacked several of the Special Forces bases guarding the Mnong plateau along the Cambodian border.

About a month before, a Special Forces major at Duc Lap had told me about a big North Vietnamese buildup in Cambodia. The Americans, he said, were worried about a possible tank concentration on the other side of the border. Even the light Soviet-built PT-76 tanks could knock huge holes in the South Vietnamese army if the NVA managed to get them in. The only tank road in the Central Highlands area was Route 14, running roughly southwards from Ban Me Thuot. If the North Vietnamese managed to take Route 14 there would be little stopping them from rolling deep into South Vietnam. Special Forces had been campaigning for months to get approval for a preventive strike into Cambodia, the major told

me, but as long as Prince Sihanouk was in power it couldn’t be done. (The major also told me his men had found a dead Chinese adviser with the North Vietnamese, but the Saigon high command had hushed the story up.) To protect Route 14 the Green Berets had built a large fire-support base at a place called Bu Prang on the Cambodian border.

Now, Thom Marlowe told me, the North Vietnamese were laying siege to the camp. He said they were kicking hell out

of the Americans and South Vietnamese. The Americans had built three other fire-support bases to protect Bu Prang: the NVA had overrun these and now were getting ready to hit the main camp.

It sounded like a good story. I checked out of the hospital and arranged a flight to Ban Me Thuot. There I ran into a Life correspondent who told me he had been shot down twice over Bu Prang. The second time had been at night and he was lucky to have made it back alive. He wasn't going back, he said.

I teamed up with Frank Mariano, an ABC reporter. He'd been a chopper pilot himself for several years and had the connections necessary to finagle a flight into the camp. When the chopper finally materialized it was a lumbering Jolly Green Giant, a huge cargo helicopter. It flew very slowly towards the camp, not even taking any evasive action.

"Is this guy trying to get us offed?" I asked Frank as we neared Bu Prang.

"I'll tell you the bad news after we land."

"No, man. Tell me now!"

"Okay. We're carrying ammo. One bad jolt and up we go."

"My, isn't that pretty country," said the Special Forces commander at Bu Prang, Capt. William Palmer. "This country should be used for raising cattle, not for war."

The country was pretty; gentle rolling hills, speckled with purple-green forests, it looked a little like the Black Hills of

South Dakota, or the California Sierra Nevada in the fall. To

the west, towards Cambodia, a fierce wind blew in oceans of mist and fog. With the winds came a biting cold that made the men shiver at night under mounds of blankets in their bunkers. They wore sweaters and field jackets under their flak jackets, but they were still cold.

In the center of the camp, like some sacrificial altar, an observation tower built of sandbags gave a commanding view of the surrounding area. Although the tower was a prime target for the NVA gunners firing recoilless rifles from the nearby hill, the camp's Green Berets and a few newsmen would climb to the top to watch the war. In most combat the participants seldom know what is happening beyond their own platoon, but at Bu Prang the fighting was clearly visible from the sandbag tower.

The Green Berets cheered the war like kids at a football game. '"Shit, did you see that?" hooted one, nudging his buddy as a huge reddish-yellow mushroom billowed on a nearby hill. They shouted encouragement each time the F-4 Phantom came screaming overhead, dropping its cargo of death on the NVA.

"Hey, pilot," shouted the other troop, looking skyward, "Clyde just said your mother sucks dick." They were very partisan fans. For days the North Vietnamese had been mercilessly pounding the camp with artillery, mortar, rocket and recoilless-rifle fire. The Berets knew the pilots were all that stood between them and the 66th NVA regiment.

Throaty, staccato bursts of small-arms fire were audible from the small wooded hillock which was being pounded by

the fighters. An ARVN battalion had just been withdrawn from the hill, according to the lieutenant colonel of Special Forces, and the Communist troops were moving in to get as close as possible to the camp. The tempo of small-arms fire picked up as the NVA pressed the attack. Some of the Special Forces enlisted men told a different story: the NVA 108 Flower of the Dragon was knocking the ARVN off the hill. “Holy shit,” hollered one of the Berets watching through binoculars, “that sure as hell looks like Clyde running down that hill.” Like an army of ants, hundreds of tiny figures swarmed over the mound. Taking the glasses, his buddy stuttered in amazement: “If that’s Clyde, how come they ain’t dead?”

For weeks the North Vietnamese had been getting closer to Bu Prang. MACV, from its press camp at the old imperial hunting lodge in Ban Me Thuot, said the situation was well in hand, but the men at Bu Prang could see the NVA moving closer day by day, toward the camp’s perimeter. It seemed that each day they had a new recoilless rifle or mortar position pounding away at the camp.

Outside the camp’s outer wire, on three hills a few hundred meters away, were two battalions of the ARVN 47th Regiment, 22nd Division, and two battalions of Montagnard tribesmen and their Green Beret commanders. The only way to save the camp, said one of the Green Beret “A” team, was to go out and get those NVA guns and “put pressure on Clyde.” That was not happening. The Montagnards were good troops, perhaps the best in Vietnam, but they “were

being ground down' by too much combat, too much marching and too much death. They were becoming demoralized and, some Green Berets feared, probably wouldn't be worth much if things got really bad.

Bu Prang was manned by a weird assortment of units. There were Vietnamese ARVN and LLDB: Montagnards and a mysterious detachment of Cambodians both with their families along: Green Berets, U.S. artillerymen, a Signal Corps team, an Air Force detachment, and an array of sergeants, captains and majors from MACV. Each unit spent its days stealing, trading, fighting and scrounging for the things it needed to survive, especially to hold up the sandbags and keep them from caving in on their heads.

Although the ARVN troops had fought well for the first weeks of the Communist offensive, they too were being ground down. When American planes accidentally killed twenty South Vietnamese soldiers, the ARVN began to show signs of weariness. As at Ben Het, rumors of ARVN troops abandoning wounded Americans had spread through the camp, although they could not be verified. The image of brothers-in-arms fighting for freedom conjured up by the MACYV public relations men just wasn't true at Bu Prang. saw the camp's Civil Affairs Political Officer pull out his 45-caliber automatic and point it at the head of two ARVNs who, he said, were trying to steal supplies meant for the CIDG, the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups.

The Special Forces didn't even trust all the Montagnards.

“We know there are informers in that camp,” said one of the “A” team’s high-ranking NCOs. When the NVA hit, they didn’t know who in the camp would turn on them. “All I can say,” said another NCO, ‘“is that when the shit starts, I'm going to shoot anybody who comes near my bunker.”

The Berets resented MACV, which had come barging into what the Berets thought should be their show. They chafed under the MACYV bureaucracy -it seemed that it took an Act of Congress before they could fire their guns. They hated the strange colonels who stayed in the TOC, the only really safe place at Bu Prang, giving out a never-ending stream of orders.

On Tuesday, my second day in camp, I went up onto the observation tower to watch the war. It was beautiful, especially at night. From the tower, the panorama, in living color, could be seen for miles. Sometimes at night the ARVN and the NVA looked like two opposing armies of the future, fighting with laser beams instead of bullets. Now, as I watched from the tower, a fierce artillery duel between the ARVN First of the 47th and the NVA looked like a scene from the Revolutionary War. On a far hill, massed in a wide circle, were the ARVN soldiers. Shells were landing perilously

close to their positions, sometimes in their midst.

Suddenly shells began pounding around the tower. Recoilless-rifle shells whooshed overhead as the NVA gunners started adjusting their firc -the puffs of smoke from the NVA f guns were clearly visible from the tower and the NVA knew they either had to get the tower or face death. If they didn’t,

napalm would soon come screaming out of the sky—huge, red, jellied balls spreading fire that scorches the flesh and sears the lungs.

Now recoilless-rifle fire was coming from a hill the ARVN was supposed to be protecting. Near the tower a platoon of artillerymen started to dig in frantically; they were very young and they looked as if they wanted very much to live.

“This army’s fucked,” lamented a massive black gunner. “Look at those gooks over there shooting at us and nobody is doing nothin’ about it.”

A white sergeant walked over and told the gunner to load sandbags. “Ain’t gonna do it,” shot back the gunner.

“What did you say?” £

“I told you I ain’t gonna do it. If I fill any sandbags it’s going to be for my bunker.” The argument became heated and the gunner shouted, so that every artilleryman in the area could hear, “Go fuck yourself.” The sergeant mumbled an inaudible reply, and the GI fired back, “You heard what I said, go fuck yourself.”

The five signalmen manning the radio had waited all day] for timber, but it never came. “Shit, if a shell hit this place the whole thing would collapse,” said a GI who had volunteered to help the radio men build their bunker. He was only twenty-five days ‘“short” (of discharge) and wanted no part of Bu Prang. They had tried to scrounge some timbers from the Green Berets with no luck. They cringed in the makeshift sandbag bunker, praying that no shell would land close and cursing the colonels safe in the TOC.

Over in the TOC bunker a Special Forces colonel exuded

confidence. “How many regiments would it take to overrun this camp, Colonel?” I asked him.

“Come on, why don’t you ask me how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?”

“Aren’t the North Vietnamese doing the same thing they did at Dien Bien Phu knocking out the fire-support bases and then the camp’s artillery?”

“It’s not at all the same.” He discounted the importance of the camp’s firebases, saying they weren’t really needed.

Later that day the colonel left the camp. After he left, the press were ordered out of Bu Prang. Dana Stone (a freelancer) and I hid when the chopper cameo to pick up the newsmen, and when Captain Palmer, the camp commander, found us he just smiled as if to say, “Welcome to the club.”

He told us why the press had been kicked out: “We’re pretty sure they’re going to hit us tonight. They’re close, really close.”

Palmer looked worried. The North Vietnamese, he said, had managed to fight their way between the ARVN and the camp’s perimeter, and now there wasn’t much stopping them from hitting the wire except air cover. And air cover depended on the fog.

For the first time in a long while, I was afraid. There are two times when fear of war is greatest: the first time in

combat, when you are afraid of the unknown and of your own reactions will you freak out, run, crack up?: and then at some point when you are afraid of the known, afraid that the horrors lurking in your mind will be remembered, perhaps relived. Between the two, after the first few times under fire, a sort of euphoria sets in.

The situation at Bu Prang was bad. Like a giant crab, the NVA was pinching the bleeding camp from both ends. Having overrun the three fire-support bases, they had systematically knocked out the ARVN guns guarding the camp's vital airstrip, its umbilical cord. All the ARVN 105 mm tubes had

been destroyed when an NVA shell set off the howitzers' ammunition; that left only the two American 105s and the two CIDG howitzers.

The camp was pear-shaped. At the vulnerable top, with no overhead cover, were the big guns. Inside the pear was an inner perimeter defended by the Special Forces and their CIDG mercenaries. The TOC bunker and the colonels were inside this line, the U.S. artillerymen outside. The North Vietnamese had established recoilless-rifle positions on the ridges commanding the U.S. guns and were beginning to pour in accurate and deadly fire. Unless they were knocked out, they would destroy the camp's guns one by one.

The defenders were facing the legendary NVA 66th Regiment. Some of the Berets remembered the 66th from Ben Het. The colonel who left earlier that day had said there were a lot of myths about the 66th which might no

longer be true—"they sure took a beating at Ben Het''--but to the men who faced them, the myths were still true. "If we had them instead of the ARVN, this war would be over in a week," cracked one Green Beret.

As the sun set, the defenders knew the NVA was very close, and that their own survival depended on an outside force—those massive greyish clouds looming in from Cambodia. TAC AIR-Tactical Air Support—needed at least a five-hundred-foot ceiling to provide air support for the camp. [f the ceiling dropped any lower than it was at dusk, it would be too low. The B-52s could still fly in the soup, but they couldn't bomb any closer than two miles from the allied troops with any degree of safety. And the NVA was a lot closer than two miles.

The NVA tactics were simple but effective: wait until the weather turned so bad that air cover could not be supplied, knock out the camp's 105s, and attack with a sapper charge. In rain, or even heavy mist, the camp commander couldn't risk using mortars for fear of triggering the sensitive firing

mechanism of the shells, which would explode over the gunners' heads. Once the sappers were inside the wire, the camp would be in chaos. It would be difficult to tell friend from foe, and panic-stricken men would fire on anything that moved.

The CIDG and ARVN had spotted about thirty Russian made amphibian tanks on the Cambodian side of the border, and some reports said they were on the move into Vietnam.

Every Beret old-timer had heard about the night the NVA used tanks at Lang Vei. A Special Forces camp near Khe Sanh, Lang Vei was overrun by troops who came rumbling down the road in the light but deadly tanks. The Americans who survived had to claw their way out at night, under unbelievably heavy fire, back to Khe Sanh.

Later on Tuesday the shelling became heavier. Like a cat playing with a mouse, the NVA tried shelling at different times to catch men in the open. You never knew when the first shell would whine overhead and then crash with the sound of thunder. Some of the men could spot the sound of an NVA shell being fired and were able to get a head start. When the first shell thudded, the race was on; your life depended on getting to that bunker before the next one landed.

“Quick, get in,” shouted a panting Green Beret scrambling to get into the back of a sandbagged bunker. “I don’t think it will cave in,” he said; it was a hope rather than a statement. In the pitch blackness neither his face nor his rank was visible. He talked for a long time in the darkness about the shellings, about death, about the secret fear of war of someone who has seen too much combat too fast. Though he had been in Vietnam only a couple of months he already had a Purple Heart and deep scars as souvenirs. He breathed hard as the shells pounded outside.

Lower and lower came the clouds until the sky was completely covered. So far, the NVA hadn’t hit Bu Prang at night, and that was comforting, but this Tuesday was

different; they were hitting more often. Maybe the night would be different too. Overhead, the drone of a Spooky C-47 could be heard, very high in the sky.

“Hey, it’s Spook,” said one of the Green Berets in the sandbag tower. “Hiya, Spook,” said the other softly, almost as if greeting an old friend.

Spook gave the men a comforting feeling, like a guardian angel flying over the camp. Spook would never leave them, they would say; he was there night after night that same funny groan and the same arching fireballs that disappeared just before they hit the ground. Every night the men slept to the lullaby of Spook talking, circling round the camp all night, with a groaning Gatling gun that spewed out fire at such an awesome rate that Spook could fill up a football field in minutes. No, the Berets reflected, looking skyward, Spook would never leave us.

The shelling didn’t stop. That night the NVA poured in the first nighttime barrage on the camp. When it started, some of the men were watching television in the teamhouse, some working on their bunkers, and some finishing off their “indigenous packs”—rice packs for ‘“indigenous personnel.” First it was the reckless-reckless, as the radio men call the recoilless rifle; then the mortars came thudding in. Visibility was very low; even Spook had to leave. The men felt very much alone.

r The dash for the bunkers was macabre at night. The fierce wind blew the flares over the camp at about thirty miles per hour. Shadows and images quickly changed as the flares

sailed overhead. What looked like a bunker would turn out to be a mirage caused by the drifting flares. All the time the shells continued to pound the camp.

There were about six men huddled at the mouth of the TOC. The NVA fire was getting more intense and the sky was lit up by a galaxy of flares. The biting wind nipped at the

-

mouth of the bunker. The radio crackled with the frantic calls of men on the ground calling for air support. “We¢ have been under fire for thirty minutes,” pleaded an unknown voice on the radio.

On the far hill the ARVN started to receive intense ground fire. Was it an NVA probe? Again the radio, garbled and scratchy, announced that the NVA was moving in. “There are about seventy-five bad guys trying to get to the parachutes,” said the voice.

Earlier in the day, Air Force Caribous fighting near-gale winds missed their parachute drop and some of the supplies fell into no-man’s-land between the opposing forces. Now the NVA was moving in to get to the crates, which might contain radios. With those radios, they would know everything that was going on in the camp.

The chilling winds continued to blow, overcast clouds blocking out the sky. Later, word was received that North Vietnamese troops were hitting the ARVN camped on the hill across from the valley separating Bu Prang and the NVA. The din of gunfire was shattering.

Several machine guns in the camp started barking out bursts of fire as the frightened CIDG got trigger-happy. Or were they being attacked? As the firing became louder, the men instinctively crouched back away from the door of the bunker. Shells continued to come popping in around the camp.

From the tower that night the sky was lit for miles by flares. Sinister crouching figures darted in the valley below. You would see them for a moment and then they would vanish. Was it an illusion? The flying flares, whipped on parachutes by the wind, played tricks with our eyes. The CIDG were increasing their fire. Black layers of fog swept over the camp. No Phantoms would come swooping out of the sky to maul the NVA tonight. There would be no Medevac choppers; there would be no replacements dropped in by heli118
Flower of the Dragon
copter. How would the CIDG and the ARVN stand up to tanks if they did come? It was good tank country, with wide open stretches of grass and even a fairly good tank road right into the camp.

Early in the evening the ground quaked as if a giant hand were shaking Bu Prang—a thousand thunderbolts exploding at once. The beds shook, the windows rattled. The Montagnards prayed for it to be over, but the Americans smiled—it was the B-52s.

Ten times the B-52s came in dropping tons of death on the NVA; they came as close as they dared to Bu Prang.

“I don’t know if they killed Clyde, but they sure helped

our morale," said Captain Palmer.

Suddenly the night became clear and starry. The three-quarter moon glistened and sent a glow over the countryside, and with it came the Phantoms. Screeching in overhead, they tilted their wings and dived. Turning off their lights, they were suddenly invisible. There would be no attack that night.

The dawn brought no feeling of thankfulness. The North Vietnamese were afraid to fire at night because the flash of their mortar tubes could be seen for miles. For them dawn was one of the best times, before the Phantoms arrived.

For the wives and children of the CIDG defenders, life went on as usual throughout the shelling. When the shells dropped, a mother would gather the children, scooping them up by the armful at a fast trot like a mother hen guiding her baby chicks towards safety. The civilians at Bu Prang shared the same fate as the troops—the same food, the same quarters, the same risk of death. Each day wounded women and children were brought to the dispensary. Every family had its own bunker, and the deeper the bunker, the better the chances of survival. All worked on the bunkers—young and old, men and women.

The shelling was starting to get to the CIDG. Many of their

wives and children had been hit and the men were beginning to show signs of fatigue.

On Wednesday the shelling came from two new directions, one a recoilless-rifle position looking down the throats of the

U.S. artillerymen. Up on the vulnerable machine-gun tower, Green Beret Fritz Wertz was watching the NVA fire, trying to call in an air strike on the recoilless-rifle position. “My God, they’re nowhere close to it,” screamed Wertz. “If this keeps up I might as well go catch some sleep.” The Phantoms’ bombs fell harmlessly several hundred meters from the target. Ever since MACV had taken control of the camp, Wertz, like many of the “A” team, had felt helpless. He could see the bombs missing, but he couldn’t talk directly with the pilots. It was MACV’s show. “They never leave the TOC, so how can they know what’s going on?” he muttered.

Wertz cursed as the Phantom missed again. An Army FAC (Forward Air Control) plane had also spotted the recoilless rifle position and popped a marking rocket for the Phantoms. “That’s it,” shouted Wertz, grabbing the radio to say the FAC had hit the right spot. “Now maybe we’ll get somewhere.”

Wertz, with his shock of blond hair, square, jutting jaw and inquiring eyes, was the perfect model for an Army recruiting poster. He was bitter about MACV. Each day the NVA was digging in more guns and somebody had to go out and get them. Why couldn’t they see that, he complained. The recoilless rifle on the hill directly across the green valley was firing again at Wertz’s tower.

Standing alone in the tower with his .50-caliber machine gun, he cracked ear-piercing volleys of fire back at the NVA. The enemy shells had sprayed frag pieces on the tower two days earlier, injuring one American.

Wertz, working through MACV red tape, finally got the two American artillery pieces to fire at the recoilless rifle. Still they couldn't knock it out. More bomb strikes and

artillery shells were fired: still the recoilless rifle kept harassing the camp.

The U.S. artillerymen, still working to build their bunkers, began to talk about Ben Het, where for fifty-eight days the defenders were trapped facing NVA guns with no troops sent out to rescue them. "I hear Ben Het started just like this," said one. Bu Prang was even more vulnerable than Ben Het: the red clay was almost impossible to dig into, and it couldn't be used to make cement for real protection. "Sure, we need cement," said a Special Forces lieutenant colonel, "but what would 7ime say if we flew sand in here?"

In addition to the two Montagnard companies defending Bu Prang, there was a Cambodian CIDG company. When it came up to Bu Prang from 1V Corps, it had very poor leadership, the Green Berets told me. The leaders would sell food and supplies on the black market and would pad payrolls. "They were the worst bunch I've ever seen," said a sergeant. Under new leadership the outfit had shaped up, and now it was a good fighting unit. But the ethnic Cambodians, descendants of the proud Khmer empire- once one of the most powerful in Southeast Asia had almost as much reason to hate the Vietnamese as the Montagnards did. Many of them looked to Cambodia as their true homeland.

The Khmer empire had been destroyed in the crush between

Vietnamese and Thai nationalism, and although the troops were mercenaries, some Berets wondered if they would really die just for money. The CIDG would often look out from their bunkers towards the NVA recoilless-rifle positions and mutter. They knew someone had to go out there.

By Wednesday the sense of futility was contagious. The Green Berets talked about their ex-commander, Col. Robert Rheault; somehow things weren't the same since he'd been removed. Their last two commanders had not even been Special Forces qualified.

"Now they're dropping the qualifications, letting in just

plain Joes," said Wertz, who had gone through eleven months of rigorous training to become a Special Forces medic. When he was trained, as many as three-fourths of the class flunked out: now, he complained bitterly, they were taking medics straight out of line units to serve with Special Forces. Green Beret medics were good, and they knew it.

There was a feeling that the battle was reaching a climax. "If Clyde is going to do something, he'd better do it now," said Captain Palmer, always conscious of the storm clouds looming over the mountains toward Cambodia.

The recoilless rifle, after repeated shellings, air strikes and machine-gun fire, was still chipping away. The Special Forces knew that the NVA guns had to be destroyed. The American artillerymen groused and bitched: Why did they have to take the shelling when no one would go after the NVA guns? It was Ben Het all over, they said.

Something had to be done to lift morale. The recoilless rifle was doing more than cut down bodies--the NVA guns were causing a death of the mind. Symptoms of the disease had been seen in the trenches at Khe Sanh and Ben Het—the glassy stare, the feeble mutterings.

Waiting for the shells to come crashing into their bunkers; waiting in the darkness, silent, some of the men thought of the last hours of Firebase Kate. In those last hours the NVA barrage was so bad that the CIDG, American artillerymen and Green Berets felt their heads were exploding with a thousand thunders. Their adrenalin pumped, their breathing became slow and heavy, their hearts beat very fast and they waited. There was one man in the bunker at Bu Prang who had white phosphorus scars. The North Vietnamese used white phosphorus shells in that final salvo on Firebase Kate, just before the attack. In air bursts, the powdery white phosphorus would burn through human skin. A piece large enough could burn right through a man's arm. As at Kate, the NVA was inching its way toward Bu Prang, creeping in like

the rain clouds from Cambodia. MACV must know that, cursed the Green Berets. They had to get those guns.

Word quickly spread through the camp that sixty Cambodian CIDGs were going to attack the recoilless-rifle position, charging across more than two hundred meters of open ground against intense enemy fire from well-dug-in positions. Hundreds of men in the camp looked out over the sandbags through the slits in their trenches and waited, glad they were

not out there. “Can they really do it?” asked a man in my trench. “No way,” said another. The mission was a gamble at best. No Americans went out with the patrol.

The Cambodians, charging up the hill, raked by murderous crossfire, looked like an army of ants. It was a brave charge by men who were not fighting for money, or for the Americans, or for the South Vietnamese, or even for their own country. They were fighting for life the lives of their families. Every one of them knew, and every one of us in the camp knew, that it was up to them -if they failed to take those NVA guns, the camp was doomed. And their chances were almost hopeless. To charge over two hundred meters against entrenched positions, facing a withering crossfire, was to court death.

The firing increased until it sounded as if a thousand guns were cracking, as the Cambodians inched their way up the hill. They were almost out of sight, but I could tell by the firing that it was hell.

We all knew the North Vietnamese would be ready that night. They would knock out our remaining guns with their recoilless rifles, which had us zeroed in, and then they would & attack. The story of the fall of Bu Prang would take up ten inches in the New York 7imes; for us it would be everything. The camp was demoralized. The weeks of pounding had not only softened up the defenses, they had also softened up the men.

Then we heard over the radio that the Cambodians had

nearly reached the summit, taking heavy casualties. They were pinned down by an unbelievable concentration of fire but I knew they would keep going until they all were dead - there would be nothing at Bu Prang to return to if they fell.
So the Cambodians fixed their bayonets and charged again, screaming as they raced forward. Two of the Cambodians had managed to sneak around to the crest on the other side of the hill, and they hit the North Vietnamese from the side, causing enough of a diversion to allow their comrades to reach the top of the hill. The North Vietnamese fought hard: it was a brutal hand-to-hand battle. More Communist reinforcements were thrown in, but still the Cambodians charged on, throwing grenades, until they reached the recoilless-rifle positions.
When word spread through the camp that they had reached the top, few of us could believe it. A half dozen Green Berets volunteered to drive out to the hill and bring back the Cambodians with their prize, the captured recoilless rifles.
We could see the trucks coming back, their wheels kicking up clouds of dust as they raced through the volleys of North Vietnamese fire. As the trucks got nearer, we could see the terrible price the Cambodians had paid to save Bu Prang. But those who were still able to were standing up in the truck shouting. At first the defenders of Bu Prang just stared at the Cambodians. They had been too numbed by the shelling and the fear of death to do anything. Gradually they began to

climb out of their holes and look in amazement at their saviors. Then one man let out a shout, then another, until soon everyone in the camp was cheering. Some had tears streaming down their faces and others raced after the trucks, holding out their arms and shouting.

When the Cambodians reached the camp dispensary, there were hundreds of men chasing the trucks and cheering. All

of us wanted to help carry the wounded. What could we say‘* : to these men who had just saved our lives? ':

The wives of the wounded men came running, looking for their husbands among the dead and dying. One young Cambodian soldier, his leg shattered, his hip a mass of pulp, was in deep shock, lying on a stretcher. While Wertz and other medics worked to save the young man’s life, another soldier cradled his head and gently rocked him. There was another young soldier whose genitals were deeply slashed. I will never forget the screams of his wife. These men paid a very high price for our war.

After awhile I went off by myself and sat down and cried. There was nothing I could say to them. Men whose lives had value had suffered to save mine. I was through with war, with killing and with death. As I took the chopper out of Bu Prang the next day, I decided never to come back. I had seen enough.

My Lai

It was September 1969 and a rumor had just begun to spread around Saigon that over a year ago some troops of the Americal Division had massacred several hundred villagers at a place called Son My, also known as My Lai (and mistakenly called Pinkville by the press). The villagers of My Lai said that the Americans had killed between 330 and 380 people: some reports. had it as high as 567.

The South Vietnamese government immediately denied the reports, saying the incident had never taken place. The first newsmen to go into the area talked to several villagers, who said they had never heard of a massacre either. According to early accounts, it never happened.

I knew that if the story was true, the South Vietnamese land American government would certainly do everything they could to cover it up. So with Jacqueline Desdames of the Overseas Weekly, who came along as a translator, I caught a flight to Americal Division headquarters at Chu Lai. The division flaks weren't too happy about getting us to My Lai, but since there were almost a dozen newsmen trying to get in, they had no choice. Next morning we piled into several jeeps and drove out to a "refugee center," a shantytown of cardboard and tin shacks on an ugly brown hill one kilometer from the massacre site. The villagers of My Lai had been "pacified" and moved into this new reservation.

It was a very cold day, and a chilling wind blew from the

South China Sea as we trudged up the hill to the slum of tin

shacks. We were among the first newsmen to come to the village, and though the American military flakmen flashed us their best PR smiles, I felt they didn't really want us to find out what had happened at My Lai. There was also a gang of armed Vietnamese strongarm men along who, unlike the Americans, made no pretense of trying to help us, intimidating any Vietnamese Jacqueline tried to interview. We managed to give them the slip and get off by ourselves; she talked to several people, but all of them seemed terrified. She looked at me and shook her head, but still we pressed on. Finally we came upon a woman wearing the typical Vietnamese conical hat. She looked old, but she was only forty-four.
She and Jacqueline talked for a long time in rapid, sing-song Vietnamese, and after awhile Jacqueline gave me a quick, sad look. "Yes," she said, 'it did happen."
Gently and slowly, the old woman reached out her hand and lightly touched Jacqueline's arm. She started to smile, then her face became contorted with sorrow. She broke into sobs, and a little Vietnamese girl gently patted her shoulder, then threw her arms around her. The woman kept touching Jacqueline lovingly: each time she touched her, she cried.
"I remember how it happened," said the woman. I was shocked and sad and sick for a long time, but I remember. remember, but I don't want to speak about it." Her eyes

never left Jacqueline. “I lost a nice as young as you, and you remind me so much of her. It brings back bad memories to talk about it . . .

“I don’t see any reason why they did that. It was not the first time the GIs came into our village, but they were never violent before. There were no Vietnamese soldiers with them. Although there was even a monk with us, they shot at everybody. They killed my little boy, he was only four, and they also killed my nice, the one as young as you she was twenty-four.”

The woman herself was wounded by a bullet in her thigh.

“It hurt so much I fell unconscious. When I recovered consciousness, tried to run away. My wound hurt very much: saw my clothes were full of blood and there was a hole in my leg. The wound stuck to my clothes.” While she spoke, two young children rested their hands on her shoulder, trying to offer comfort.

The attack came after a heavy barrage of artillery, said the woman, and all the villagers ran down into the bunkers inside their houses, usually under the beds. At the end of the shelling, she said, the Americans started calling everyone outside: “Everybody get outside here,” they ordered, and then started shooting.”

She was interrupted by a Vietnamese government official who saw her talking to us and tried to shut her up. “Stop speaking into that microphone,” he demanded. “Don’t say

one more word." Then he turned to us. "If you want anything, go and see the authorities. We are the ones who have power here, and if there is anything you need, you must ask our permission first." He was joined by others, but I stood between them and Jacqueline and told her to continue. More reporters and a television team rushed over, and the government gunman backed off. Under pressure from the newsmen, he claimed that the area was unsafe because of Vietcong.

Another old woman said she was eating breakfast when a ' man ran in front of her house shouting, "Americans are shooting everybody down, they are killing everybody." Panic-stricken, the old woman ran. "I ran away, leaving everything behind me, but I was too afraid to think about it. Some of the people I was with wanted to return to the village in the afternoon, but I was too afraid." When she returned in the evening, her house was burned to the ground and a child was lying in front of it. "He had a big hole in his stomach and his intestines were coming out and his throat had been cut, probably by some of the bullets." Pointing to a child seven or eight years old, she said, "He was as old as this one."

Another woman ran away when the shooting started: when she returned, she found her friend, the mother of nine, dead. "She was lying on the ground, dead, still holding a child who appeared to be nursing from her breast. I thought the child was alive, but when I picked him up I saw he had a big wound. A GI must have killed him while he was nursing."

One old man said, 'I don't know why they killed my

people that time." He said the GIs came often to the village, bringing food, candy, even medicine. "There were no Vietcong in the village that day. Sometimes the VC would come to the village, call us, and talk to us during the hours [propaganda lectures], but not that day."

Another old man, his head slightly bent and his face saddened, said he hadn't run away because "the GIs usually were very nice when they came to the village." Pointing to several young children, he said, "A lot just like those were killed." He had lost two nephews, one three years old and the other ten. In My Lai, he said, the Americans killed everything that moved —people, dogs, cats, cattle.

Like some of the other villagers we talked to, this man was. interrupted by armed South Vietnamese soldiers when he told of a South Vietnamese official who had accompanied the GIs. "If you haven't seen this Vietnamese yourself, don't talk about him," threatened one of the soldiers. The old man stopped talking.

Another man, who survived because he had time to run away, learned when he returned that his son was dead. The dead were strewn about in piles, he said, adding that they had probably been gunned down in groups after being rounded up by the Americans. "I myself buried dozens of villagers," he added.

After talking to the villagers I was convinced the massacre had happened, though I knew the South Vietnamese government would still try to deny it. They might try to intimidate

the villagers, or the witnesses might even vanish--that happened a lot in South Vietnam. But if we could find the bones of the victims, Saigon could no longer deny it. Some of us in the press group asked the Americans to take us to the site of the massacre itself, about a kilometer away, to look for the bones. They refused, saying the area was held by the Communists and it was too dangerous for us. We suggested they send an armed escort with us, but still they refused.

We talked it over and decided to go anyway. There were some local militiamen standing around (called Ruf-Pufs, for Regional Forces-Popular Forces), and we hired them to go with us as an armed escort. We gave them several thousand piasters each, more than they would make in a month, tor the two-hour march. The Americans seemed annoyed, but there wasn't anything they could do. Jacqueline stayed behind, as there might be an ambush.

We trudged off down the road, nine newsmen looking for bones, with our own squad of mercenaries for protection. After about an hour we reached the site, a clearing in the rice paddies where we could see the bombed-out shells of a few buildings.

In the clearing we found a twelve-year-old boy. His parents had sent him to market that day in March 1968: he heard artillery fire on his way back but didn't think much about it. But as he approached the village, he sensed something was wrong. When he got there he heard moaning, and some of the villagers grabbed him so he wouldn't see what had happened to his parents. They were both dead. He started to cry as he

told us the story.
He said he didn't do much now except cut wood for his grandmother. She was harvesting rice in a large paddy and we went over to talk to her. We asked her where the bones were buried and she pointed to a long trench nearby. We hunted around till we found the bones: Now we had proof.

The militiamen were spread out, M-16s at the ready, and they were getting increasingly nervous: they wanted to get out as fast as possible. Just as we found the bones, one of the militiamen started blasting the empty bushes with his carbine. Then they all started to fire. Don Baker, the head of the ABC-TV crew, whipped out a revolver so his cameraman could get a shot of him firing at the imaginary VC. But the cameraman, Terry Khoo, simply turned away in disgust.
When the shooting was over I turned around to find the old woman still looking at me. I couldn't face her. Feeling like an idiot, I took her picture. I was angry with the TV man for shooting at imaginary VC in his own private fantasy war, angry with the news media for lying to the American people, and angry mostly with myself. The people weren't getting the truth and I was just as guilty as the rest of the newsmen.
knew I would have to tone down my My Lai story so as not to offend the Thieu government. Even the Overseas Weekly had never told the American troops in Vietnam about what they were really fighting for about the torture by Thieu's political police, about the tiger cages in the Con Son island

concentration camp. The American people wanted to know if the massacre had taken place and what they were getting was a television reporter firing a .38 at some imaginary VC.

My Lai was not the act of one man. It was not the act of one platoon, or one company. It was the result of an ordered, planned and well-conducted campaign conceived at high command levels to teach a lesson to the villagers of Quang Ngai province.

I have been on dozens of combat operations in Vietnam, and I know that contact between battalion and company is, very close. A company commander normally calls battalion; to ask what course of action to take: under no circumstances

would a company CO -let alone a platoon leader—massacre three hundred fifty civilians on his own decision.

There have been many My Lais. The massacre that took place in Quang Ngai province in March 1968 was not the first, and it was not the last. The war in Vietnam is measured not by ground taken, as in most wars, but by the number of enemy killed. For many commanders, high body count is the mark of success. MACV talks about kills like a football-game announcer giving the score. Often the distinction between “Vietcong and civilians becomes cloudy, especially when, as at My Lai, the people actively support the National Liberation Front. One Ninth Division lieutenant colonel, nicknamed “The Mad Russian™ by his men, gave out his own “Sat Cong” “Kill Cong” medals to every GI who killed one of the enemy.

The killing, of course, is part of a definite political strategy, a strategy usually described as the “pacification’ of Vietnamese villagers. In his book The Betrayal, Lt. Col. William R. Corson, an ¢x-Marine who had been in charge of pacification teams, describes the pacification program in a DMZ village complex: “We had conspired with the government of South Vietnam to literally destroy the hopes, aspirations and emotional stability of thirteen thousand human beings. ... This was not and is not war it is genocide. . . . The ‘burn, baby, burn’ thesis was aptly stated by one Marine commander, who said, ‘Grab ’em by the balls and the hearts and minds will follow.”

On January 31 through February 2, 1971, a “Winter Soldier Investigation” was convened in Detroit, Michigan. At this investigation, over a hundred Gls testified to innumerable incidents they had seen or participated in, incidents of humiliation, brutality, racism, of rape, of torture, of massacre. Some of the atrocities were committed by ARVN

* William R. Corson, The Betrayal (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1968).

troops; some were perpetrated by Americans, both enlisted men and officers. Their testimony makes it undeniably clear that My Lai was no aberration, but a part of official American policy in Vietnam.*

Pfc. Charles Stephens, 101st Airborne Division:

We went up on the hill above this same village and we fired down on this village the next day while the people were trying to bury their dead ... and killed another person in the village. ... There were two little boys playing on a dike and one sergeant just took his M-16 and shot one boy ... the other boy tried to run. He was almost out of sight when this other guy, a Spec4, shot this other little boy off the dike. The little boy was lying on the ground kicking, so he shot him again to make sure he was dead.

Sgt. Scott Camil, 1st Marine Division:

The way that we distinguished between civilians and VC, VC had weapons and civilians didn't and anybody that was dead was considered a VC. If you killed someone they said, "How do you know he's a VC?" and the general reply would be "He's dead," and that was sufficient. When we went through the villages and searched people the women would have all their clothes taken off and the men would use their penises to probe them to make sure they didn't have anything hidden anywhere; and this was raping but it was done as searching. . ..

* The following testimonies are reprinted with the kind permission of Vietnam Veterans Against the War from The Winter Soldier Investigation:

An Inquiry into American War Crimes (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972). Copyright 1972 by Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Inc.

[This was on a] company level. [The company commander] never said not to or never said anything about it. The main thing was that if an operation was covered by the press there were certain things we weren't supposed to do, but if there was no press there, it was okay.

L/Cpl. Thomas Heidtman, 1st Marine Division:

There was an aura of hate in my outfit. I mean, a Vietnamese there was no such thing to my unit as a friendly Vietnamese. Every Vietnamese was a gook. I've hardly ever heard the term '"Vietnamese." They were always '"gooks." There was no difference between a good one and a bad one except that the good one at the time is carrying no weapon, but he's still fair game. ... We would move into a village and we would just sit down. We owned the village while we were there. These people would do what we told them, or they wouldn't be allowed to stay in their own house, or would be beaten inside the house.

Sgt. Michael McCusker, 1st Marine Division:

. . . a Marine had just been killed. He had been hit by a sniper and the entire battalion, in revenge, destroyed two entire villages, wiping out everything living, the people (and that was men, women, their children), all their livestock, burning the huts, destroying the paddies, their gardens ... just wiped them out—erased them. They did not exist the moment after the Marines were finished and they might never have existed.

[Another time] we were sweeping across the paddy

when this sergeant got hit. He pulled us back and called in for napalm . . . We walked into the village after the fires burned down and there was an old man lying on a cot,

burned to death with his hands stiff in rigor mortis, reaching for the sky as in prayer ... across the hedgerow there was an old woman lying dead curled into the fetal position ... An old man lay beside her. Over the next hedgerow there were thirty dead children . . . some of them were babies. Some looked like they had just been sunburned, that was all.... Others were just charred with their guts hanging out.

Pfc. Charles Leffler:

In January 1969 we were on a sweep ... through a series of rice paddies and villages in Quang Nam province, which is just southwest of Da Nang. We'd received a battalion order . .. If while sweeping on line and passing by friendly villages ... you received one round of any sort from a friendly village, the entire battalion was to turn on line and level that village. The exact wording was to kill every man, woman, child, dog, and cat in the village. This was one round from any known friendly village.

Lt. Mark Lenix, 9th Infantry Division:

In November 68, in an areca called the Wagon Wheel, which is northwest of Saigon, while on a routine search and destroy mission, gunships which were providing security and cover for us in case we had any contact were

circling ahead. Well, no contact was made, and the gunships got bored. So they made a gun run on a hootch with mini-guns and rockets. When they left the area we found one dead baby ... in its mother's arms, and we found a baby girl about three years old, also dead. Because these people were bored: they were just sick of flying around doing nothing. When it was reported to

battalion, the only reprimand was to put the two bodies on the body count board and just add them up with the rest of the dead people. There was no reprimand; there was nothing. . .

And this is why we have to stop the war. Because not only are we killing our brothers in the armed forces, and brothers on the other side, but we're killing innocent people, man, innocent civilians, who are just standing by and happen to be at the place at that time, and for no other reason than that, wind up dead.

Sgt. Jamie Henry, 4th Infantry Division:

It's the policy that is important. The executions are secondary because the executions are created by the policy that is, I believe, a conscious policy within the military. Number one, the racism in the military is so rampant. Now you have all heard of the military racism. It's institutionalized; it is policy; it is SOP; you are trained to be a racist. When you go into basic training, you are taught that the Vietnamese are not people. You are taught they are gooks and all you hear is "gook,

gook, gook, gook." ... The Asian serviceman in Vietnam is the brunt of the same racism because the GIs over there do not distinguish one Asian from another. . . .

You are trained "'gook, gook, gook," and once the military has got the idea implanted in your mind that these people are not humans, they are subhuman, it makes it a little bit easier to kill 'em. ... And if you're not an effective killer, they don't want you. The military doesn't distinguish between North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, Vietcong, civilian—all of them are gooks, all of them are considered to be subhuman. . . . And all of them can be killed and most of them are.

Now the second reason for atrocities that occur is because it doesn't take very long for an infantryman in the field to realize that he is fighting for nobody's freedom. ... They may have thought they were fighting to protect their mother when they got there, but they sure don't believe that very long. And this isn't just the grunt. It's the lieutenants, it's the officers in the field.

It takes only a few months to be subjugated to the circumstances of Vietnam when you come to the realization that you are not fighting for Ky's freedom; you are not fighting for Thieu's freedom; you are not fighting for your mother's freedom or anybody's freedom. You're just getting your ass shot up and all you want to

do is go home.

When I was about eight I used to ask my father what he'd been doing when Hitler rose to power, and he would reply that he'd been too busy trying to earn a living to pay attention. My mother would add that people didn't know what was going on in Germany.

Now my father's generation shakes its head in dismay and wonders out loud how my generation could turn away from those values which "made America great." But they never told us that genocide was an old American habit, that U.S. soldiers scalped hundreds of Indian women and children at Sand Creek and held up their scalps at the Salt Lake City opera house; that hundreds more defenseless Indians were gunned down at Wounded Knee, that Gen. Jake Smith ordered the massacre of 8,294 children, 2,714 women and 420 men on the island of Samar during the American occupation of the Philippines in 1901.

My Lai 143

For me and for millions of my generation My Lai came as the final punch in the mouth, the end of our illusions. We could no longer say we didn't know. The day we learned of My Lai changed our lives.

The thing about Con Phung Island that impressed me first was that the children were happy.

Thousands of children all over Vietnam have been orphaned by the war and now survive by their wits. Some of them work—-every little bar in Saigon has a boy who runs

errands and sweeps the floor, but most of them pimp, steal, sell dope, or beg. The most deformed of these kids, some of them mutilated or burned all over, are beggars on Tu Do street. When an American comes along they grab his legs; if he gives something to one of them, hundreds come running. These children aren't children any more. They are seven- or eight-year-old animals with only one concern: survival. If they don't make enough to survive by their own efforts, they die.

Con Phung Island was a different world. I found out about the island from Roger Steffens, a former poet and actor working for Psyops. After the Tet offensive in the spring of 68, Americans sent tons of supplies to Vietnam for refugees--food, building equipment, medicine—almost all of which was appropriated by Saigon officials. Roger got so angry that he went back to the States, raised several tons of food and clothing on his own, and began distributing it to Buddhist refugees through Madame Dzu, the wife of Truong Dinh Dzu, the opposition peace candidate imprisoned by Thieu during the 1967 election. Through the Buddhists

Roger made contact with the Daoist* community on Con Phung Island in the mouth of the Mekong River south of Saigon. The island, he told me, was a good place to get away from the war.

Before Bu Prang I had gone to Laos to do a story on the refugees from the American bombing. I found the refugees,

thousands of them, in barbed-wire camps. They were fed, but that was all; there was nothing for them to do but sit in one place all day with blank stares on their faces. I came back really depressed and needing a place to relax. It was then that Roger told me about the island.

Con Phung, he said, was a sanctuary. It was a community of six thousand Daoists, a third of them deserters and the rest refugees. Most of the deserters were from the South Vietnamese army, but some were former Vietcong. The island existed, Roger explained, for people who wanted out of the war, and both sides seemed to have agreed not to touch it. He showed me pictures: temples, pagodas. huge structures built along the shoreline, thousands of red-robed monks. I was cynical: it looked like something out of Disneyland. I decided to go see it for myself.

It took about an hour and a half in the taxi down to My Tho, the port on the Mekong River opposite the island. My Tho was just like Saigon: hundreds of people hustling, begging, selling things. But as soon as I got off the ferryboat to the island, things were different. Nobody hustled; as soon found out, money wasn't even used on the island. The people were self-sufficient; they were vegetarians and they managed to grow enough to feed everyone.

The feeling on the island was one of peace. The children took me by the hand and walked with me, laughing and playing. People smiled; even though I was an American everybody seemed to accept me. It was the first time I had felt

* Daoism is the Vietnamese version of the Chinese Taoism,

anything like that in Vietnam. They all addressed one another as ‘“brother’ or ‘‘sister’’; six thousand people and they seemed like one big family. I soon found out they could all do anything they wanted to do—work, grow vegetables, build boats—and yet somehow everybody had enough to eat. Along with some friends from Saigon, I began to use the island as a refuge. Always, after just a couple of hours there, I felt like a new person. At night on the island we would go up into the bell tower and listen to the gong; a huge one, made of melted-down cannon shells, it tolled twenty-four hours a day. All the lights on the island would be out and we would be up high, listening to the wide, muddy Mekong flow past. On the island everything was quiet at night, but from Kien Hoa province across the river we would hear the war—artillery, bombings, machine guns, sometimes small-arms fire. Kien Hoa is a Vietcong stronghold, the place where the Viet Minh began the war against the French, and there was always fighting going on there. Just a few hundred yards away was the war, but on the island, everything was peace.

I came back from My Lai deeply troubled. The incident with the imaginary VC at the massacre site had shaken me: I was starting to question my role as a journalist. I decided to go to the island for a couple of days to unwind. I called Jack Martin, the artist; Thom Marlowe; and a GI, Eric Nelson, for company, and we grabbed a taxi down to My Tho.

As soon as we landed on the island I knew something was wrong. People seemed frightened. When I ran into Dao Phuc, a man I knew from previous visits, I found out why: the Kien Hoa province police, and perhaps even Thieu's own National Police, were massing to attack the island. Apparently Thieu was worried that the new Vietnamization campaign might produce a big increase in desertions, and if soldiers knew they could be safe on Con Phung, it would be a strong incentive to desert. The police had sent an ultimatum to the leader of the

island community, a Daoist monk called the Dao Dua—the "Coconut Monk"—ordering him to turn back the deserters; if he cooperated, Thieu wouldn't attack.

The Dao Dua, however, was a militant pacifist. The Con Phung community, of which he was the spiritual leader, was intended as a deliberate symbol of a peace that was possible throughout Vietnam. "All you have to do to end the war," the Dao Dua would say, "is stop fighting."

Earlier the Dao Dua had gone to Saigon to present a cage containing a cat and a family of mice to the American ambassador. The cat had raised and nursed the mice and the Dao Dua wanted to show the ambassador that if the cat and the mice could get along, so could both sides in the war. John Steinbeck IV, the writer, played the flute outside the American embassy as the Dao Dua took in the cage. The Dao Dua proposed to the Americans that both sides go to the island and talk it out. The Dao Dua, who had survived seven imprisonments by various regimes, had gotten away with things

nobody else in Vietnam could have done. For several years he had openly advocated various attempts to bring peace to Vietnam, offering to go himself to Hanoi, or to have all sides meet on the island. He had a considerable following in the Delta region, as he was considered a holy man (though the region is primarily Buddhist and the island community Daoist); even the Delta province police treated him with respect.

This time the Dao Dua answered the police ultimatum with a counterproposal of his own. He proposed to sail to Con Son Island, the government concentration camp off the mouth of the Mekong in the South China Sea, liberate the island, and set up another peaceful community there.

Dao Phuc told me the police might attack Con Phung Island at any moment. That evening I went off by myself to think. I walked out to the pier, where the boat the Dao Dua

wanted to sail to Con Son Island was moored. Bobbing gently in the river, lighted by an occasional flare from the ARVN units nearby, it was a hundred-year-old junk called the Prajna, a relic of the days when pirates roamed the South China Sea. On the deck were about a dozen men, all wearing red Daoist robes. One of them invited me onto the ship.

The young man, who spoke fluent English, began to talk about the coming attack on the island. “It is true,” he said; “they are getting ready.” Then he introduced me to the others in the group, all of them members of the Prajna’s eighteen-man crew. They were all deserters, most of them

from the ARVN and a few from the Vietcong. The South Vietnamese army, the young man told me, had a desertion rate of about 20 percent a year, more in units in congested areas like the Delta. Sometimes, after a big battle, whole battalions would disappear. leaving only officers and NCOs. The raid on the island, he said, was a reaction to the government's fear that the whole army might run off if the fighting continued, either deserting or going over to the Vietcong. If the island was attacked. the ARVN deserters would be seized by the National Police, turned over to the Hoat Vu—the secret police—for questioning, and eventually jailed, probably in the concentration camp on Con Son Island.

The young Vietnamese who spoke English was named Nguyen Hong Long—"The Red Dragon." Only 27, he was the leader of the Long Hoa-—"The Flower of the Dragon"--an underground antiwar organization composed of young students and teachers (Long himself was a former teacher) and deserters. The Long Hoa put out underground newspapers, held secret meetings of students and others opposed to the war, and attempted to coordinate resistance of Buddhist and veterans' groups. All activities had to be conducted in complete secrecy because the police frequently sent infiltrators to spy on the underground. If one member of the Long Hoa was

captured, he would be tortured until he revealed the names of others in the movement; in this way the Hoat Vu was able to crush opposition.

Long said the only thing holding together the South Vietnamese

army—indeed the regime itself—was political repression. He told me there were around 200,000 political prisoners in the country, in concentration camps like the one at Con Son. At Con Son the prisoners were crammed into tiny "tiger cages," about a dozen prisoners in each cell. They had to squat in their own excrement, eating rats and roaches to survive. To punish recalcitrant prisoners, Long said, the guards would pour lye on them from above. Dead prisoners were often left in their cages for days.

Torture, Long told me, was the other effective way of silencing political opposition. He described two of the Hoat Vu's favorite tortures, the "plane ride'" and the '"submarine." In the plane ride. a prisoner was suspended from the ceiling by his feet and kicked back and forth between two guards. In the submarine, he was immersed up to his neck in a barrel of water and then the sides of the barrel were beaten until the prisoner's internal organs ruptured. Such torture was very effective as a deterrent to political opposition.

One of the main objectives of the attempt to liberate Con Son was somehow to let the world know what was going on—the tiger cages, the torture, all of it. Although many newsmen in Saigon knew about Con Son, they weren't reporting it. It was risky for them to write up such stories: Dozens of newsmen—Maynard Parker of Newsweek, Phil Brady of NBC, Don Luce. who eventually broke the story of the tiger cages—were expelled for filing stories Thieu didn't like. But government pressure wasn't the only reason for the cover-up.

When I first got to Saigon I used to go to press parties. Some of the newsmen had a sort of monthly contest to find the most deformed beggar on Tu Do street. They called it

“Mutant of the Month”—one time the winner was a hideously deformed little boy the press nicknamed “The Crab.” I soon stopped going to their parties.

Not all the newsmen were like that, of course. There were many who really tried to get the truth out, but often their bureau chiefs, who could control what was reported, didn’t want to rock the boat and successfully suppressed the truth. Bill Marmon of Time, for example, even showed me stories he’d filed in New York which were either killed or rewritten. So for most newsmen the choices were very limited: quit, or tell the truth and get thrown out of the country, or starve trying to free-lance, or go along with the bureau chiefs while trying to sneak in as much of the truth as possible.

So I told Long that many of us in the Saigon press knew about the repression and torture in Vietnam but nobody ever wrote about it. If I wrote about it in the Weekly, I told him, first, Thieu would never let the newspaper on the streets; then, I would be thrown out of the country and the paper shut down. I told Long we could write anything we liked about the Americans in Vietnam, but one mention of Con Son or the Hoat Vu and we were out.

We talked for hours that night, mostly about the voyage of the Prajna but also about other things. Men, Long thought, would have to change their lifestyle to survive. We would be

forced to evolve or we would die out.

“What new kind of man?” I asked.

“There is a bestial force in all of us which must be overcome,” he said. Con Phung Island, he went on, was a good model of how men could evolve to overcome this force. Over six thousand people lived in harmony on the island, which was only about a mile square. As vegetarians, they were making the best use of their land to feed many people. By not eating meat, they were becoming less brutal-more passive and spiritual. The island, he said, was like a big family in which every member was a part of the whole. Everyone wore

the same type of clothes and there were no predefined roles. The response of the island community to the government’s ultimatum was intended to demonstrate how this bestial force could be overcome. Long felt that eighteen deserters from both sides sailing to liberate a concentration camp could demonstrate to many people that they didn’t have to fight. He thought it might stir the conscience of the world to end the war.

I had seen Buddhist demonstrators machine-gunned in 1965 and I didn’t think the Prajna would get a mile towards Con Son. While we talked I was watching the province police gunboats on the Mekong River; I was sure that even if the gunboats did allow the Prajna to sail down to the South China Sea, Thieu would never allow the crew to land on the island. There was even a good chance, I told Long, that Thieu would blow the Prajna right out of the water.

Still, after my My Lai experience I had begun to ask myself what I was really doing in Vietnam. I certainly was having no effect on the war as a journalist. So I thought about the voyage of the Prajna, and as I saw it, the only chance for the people of the island was to attract so much attention that Thieu, still smarting from the My Lai disclosures, couldn't arrest them all. I also knew that the Saigon press, at least the foreign press, cared very little about Vietnamese demonstrations, or about how many Vietnamese were arrested by the secret police—and they thought the Dao Dua and his island a joke. But with an American reporter on board, I thought, there might be some chance of getting press attention. Finally I told Long my thoughts: "You have no chance of getting to Con Son," I said, "but you may have a chance of survival if there's an American on board as part of the crew." Long agreed, and I became the eighteenth member of the crew of the Prajna.

Next morning the Dao Dua assembled the island's six thousand people, all of them looking very frightened. A Buddhist

monk sang a prayer and made an offering of oranges as a sign that the Buddhists supported the voyage.

It was a strange moment. The island looked like a Hollywood set. But the National Police had real bullets in the machine guns on their boats and the Hoat Vu used real torture. And the people on the island were real people, not movie extras. The crew of the Prajna, who would be turned

over to the secret police if the voyage didn't succeed, were real people. I had come to love these people; it was my first real commitment to anything in Vietnam.

About ten o'clock the Daoists escorted us down to the pier and we got on the boat. The Prajna had no motor of its own, so four smaller boats pushed us out into the Mekong River. We had sailed about seven kilometers down the river when two gunboats came up fast behind us. They headed us off and one boat drew alongside, prepared to board. The men were South Vietnamese sailors, not police, and they were very polite and respectful towards the Dao Dua. But they had their orders, and after a brief conversation with the Dao Dua they towed us back to the island.

A fourteen-year-old boy on the boat called Dao Phuc the younger was the operational leader of the crew (Long made the tactical decisions). As we were being towed back to the island, he suggested we go on a hunger strike until we were able to reach Con Son. Since there wasn't much else we could do, bobbing in the Mekong, surrounded by gunboats, we agreed. We sent word to Saigon through Dao Phuc the elder that the Prajna had tried to sail for Con Son but had been . turned back and the crew were on a hunger strike. We thought Con Phung Island might have some chance of survival if the story broke before the police attacked.

Next day, a launch with eight men on board tied up alongside the Prajna; they were secret police and Kien Hoa province police. The crew of the Prajna sat down next to the Dao Dua and the secret police spokesman began his speech.

The government, he said, had been lenient too long. By trying to sail to Con Son the Dao Dua was openly breaking the law and would have to go to jail. The Dao Dua, who had been jailed twice by the Cambodians, once by the Vietcong, and four times by the Saigon government, just smiled and offered the secret police a coconut.

Long and I stood up and said that if the Dao Dua went to jail, we would go to jail too. The rest of the crew picked up the cue; each one stood up and said he would go to jail too. When we sat down, one of the police asked me what business it was of mine. I told him that i liked Vietnam and the Vietnamese people. I have seen, I said, what my people have done to yours and I can no longer be silent about the crimes committed in the war. I knew he must be aware of the My Lai massacre, and of the destruction of his nation by saturation bombing; I hoped to reach him as one human being to another.

The next morning, Long and I went for a swim. We were about a hundred yards away when we heard shouting from the Prajna: Dao Phuc had come back, bringing good news. Reuters and UPI had carried the story of the sailing worldwide; this was why the police hadn't attacked. We held a strategy meeting and decided to sail for Con Son again, but this time we would have twelve small boats to push the Prajna through the gunboats and we would pack the Prajna itself with a crew of five hundred.

All day the crew worked on a proclamation calling for a

permanent and unconditional ceasefire by midnight, February —Tet, the Vietnamese national holiday. “We cannot remain indifferent to the crimes at My Lai and Hue,*”

* Following the Tet offensive of 1968, NVA troops massacred several hundred civilians at Hue, the old imperial capital, in the belief that these people—including government officials and schoolteachers—were working for Thieu. Later, mass graves were found with bodies of people bound and shot.

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It read. “The agony has gone on much too long, and too many people have died. The crew, many of whom have fought against each other in this war, now vow as brothers to wage a nonviolent war against war. Neither imprisonment nor death will deter our mission.”

The story breaking in the wires meant we would have world opinion as a weapon on our side, but more important, it meant that Thieu would not be able to keep the story out of the Vietnamese press. Even the infamous “freedom of the press” law, under which the government could close down any newspaper that ran a story it didn’t like, couldn’t stop this story from getting out.

On the day we were to sail again for Con Son, newsmen from all over the world were on the island (even the Stars and Stripes was there!). I introduced Long to the newsmen and he gave his speech, but I don’t think it really penetrated to the press. The newsmen seemed to look on the crew as a

bunch of deserters and draft dodgers; when Long told them the crew were “‘the first soldiers in the last battle of man against the beast in himself,” they just looked puzzled.

We set sail with boatloads of press surrounding us. The Prajna was crammed to the crow’s nest with people, and so were the small boats pushing it. The police set up a chain of gunboats across the river to block our way, but the Prajna plowed right through. Like ancient men-of-war, the gunboats slammed repeatedly into our escorts, trying to turn the Prajna around. One gunboat hit us so hard that I was sure we'd sink—with five hundred Daoists on board, few of whom could swim. Finally the gunboats locked onto the Prajna and threw their engines into reverse. Still it didn’t stop us: the Prajna kept rolling down the Mekong towards Con Son.

Suddenly out from My Tho came a huge LST, a surplus American landing craft. The police swung it round in front of us, tied on, and began towing the Prajna back towards My Tho. As we started back, up on our flanks came several boats

filled with National Police, all of them wearing helmets, flak jackets and camouflage fatigues and carrying machine guns. I said to Long, “When they come to tie up, let’s jump on their boat, and you give your speech through the loud-speaker.” We were right opposite My Tho, and hundreds of people were on the bank watching while TV cameras filmed it all.

As soon as they tied up alongside we leaped off the deck of the Prajna onto the cabin of the police gunboat. For a

moment this took them aback. As they whipped out their guns and moved to get us, Long began to read his speech.*

War is the oldest and greatest calamity of mankind. Not one year goes by without the scene of man killing man. In Vietnam. war is the most protracted, with more than one million civilian casualties and over five million refugees. All religions teach us to love our neighbors and every man prefers peace to war, but peace still 1s a dream. Why is that so? ‘

War is not created by a god or a devil but by man’s action. It can and must be stopped by man’s action. There is no other way. And this is the time for action. Since 1945, when two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, the big powers have known the danger of total destruction and have compromised to remove war to the small countries. Since 1965, Vietnam has proved that war even on its smallest scale is intolerable to man’s conscience and dignity. Worldwide demonstrations of young men, M-Days [Moratorium] in the United States,

* Entitled “A Call for Commitment to the Youth in Vietnam and in the World,” Nguven Hong Long’s speech, written by him both in Vietnamese and English, was taken by South Vietnamese deserters to troops of both sides, asking them to lay down their arms, ‘

the massacres at Hue and Son My [My Lai] in Vietnam, the highest rate of desertion ever known (20 percent annually) on all sides in the Vietnam war ... all announce

the abolition of war. This is the time of commitment and of action for all peace-lovers.

War cannot continue without its supporters: to abolish war we only need to abolish the profession of soldiers, to refuse to bear arms and kill our brothers by command.

Today, we the eighteen fighters for peace, including Vietnamese and Americans, former ARVN soldiers and Communist guerrillas, having forgotten our past to live together as brothers, make the vow to march and spread the call for peace everywhere, until the war is ended. We march bearing broken guns and ringing bells made of cannon shells to call the stray soldiers to awaken from their slumber and abandon their murderous job: and to call the would-be soldiers to refuse to be drafted for the killing of their brothers.

If the war ends and if peace comes, it is not because of Washington or Moscow, Paris or Peking, Hanoi or Saigon. It is because of you in the first instance. You create peace in your own hearts when you love all people and do not kill any man in any case, for any reason.

We do not kill and peace has come to our hearts. We want that all of us may enjoy the same peace: therefore, we are willing to sacrifice ourselves, to suffer all hardships—imprisonment, torture. and even death—tfor our beliet in the fraternity of man regardless of nationality, religion, race or ideology.

The war-lovers hate us because they know that they are wrong. They call us draft-dodgers and evaders, deserters and betrayers. But the world knows that we are

the first soldiers for a humanity without war, that we are the first soldiers in the last battle of man against the beast in himself.

The authorities have a huge machine of coercion with their Police, Secret Service, Tribunal, Army, Prison ... to force us into the profession of killing. Many young men dare not oppose that huge machine as individuals. Many others believe that military service is a sacred obligation. But day by day the number of conscientious objectors to all wars is increasing, and their solidarity around the world is becoming firmer and firmer. And day by day the truth of military service is evident to every man: a savage killing among human beings.

Vietnam has suffered, more than any other country in the world, the curse of war. We aspire for peace more than any other people. Youth all over the world have demonstrated against the war. We have the greatest responsibility to struggle for peace with all our efforts and all our souls. We must turn the worst crime against humanity into the best dream of man realized on earth: the abolition of war.

The Vietnamese believe strongly in the era of Long Hoa, the Flower of the Dragon, when the spiritual power in man shall overcome the brutal force in himself,

I when love shall overcome death, when peace shall over- ‘
come war.
I Let us realize love and peace in our hearts today and
forever.
The Crew of the Prajna, December 14, 1969
[Signed] Nguyen Hong Long
The police just stood there and listened as he read —any
fighting would take place in front of the TV cameras. Finally

the head of the Kien Hoa provincial police and a couple of
high officials came onto the Prajna to parley.
Long and I followed them as they climbed up to the
crow’s nest of the Prajna to talk to the Dao Dua. They smiled
for the TV as if they were old friends of the Dao Dua, but it
was clearly a terrible loss of face. The officials were getting
lousy publicity and they knew it. So they offered the Dao
Dua a deal: Call off the demonstration and the police would
agree not to raid the island. We agreed immediately and the
police beat a hasty and undignified retreat.
The Dao Dua smiled and Long told everyone the island
had been saved. Hundreds of people started shouting “Hoa
Binh!”—‘‘peace”—and the crew of the Prajna went wild, all
five hundred of them. We hadn’t liberated Con Son, but at
least Con Phung Island was saved. Meanwhile, the story had
traveled round the world, and Long had become something
of a hero in South Vietnam. It was one of the few peace
demonstrations in South Vietnam in which the participants

had even survived, and that in itself was something of a victory.

Then Long came over to me and said: “If we can’t go to Con Son, let’s go to Saigon. Let’s go right to Thieu’s palace and demand an end to the war.”

Chi Hoa prison in Saigon is an octagon about four stories high. If you are arrested in Saigon, Chi Hoa is where they take you for interrogation. Most of the torture in the prison goes on in the Hall of Photography and Pictures: every room off the Hall has a table with a shock generator on it, two or three chairs, and a set of shackles on the wall. From the outside Chi Hoa looks like just another military barracks, one of the countless barricaded fortresses dotting Saigon.

There are five separate agencies in Saigon that engage in torture—the Hoat Vu; the Bureau of Military Security; the

Vietnamese Central Intelligence Service (which corresponds to the CIA and is the American center for double agents); the Mat Vu, or Secret Service, Thieu’s own private bodyguard; and the American-advised Phoenix Teams. Until Col. Robert :, Rheault was accused of murdering a Vietnamese earlier in 1969*, the U.S. Special Forces also operated freely in Saigon with their own team of two hundred trained Nung assassins.7

The Hoat Vu, which comes under the National Police, Thieu’s private army, is responsible for suppressing political dissent inside the country and is the most feared of the five agencies. As well as infiltrating the various potentially subversive

groups like the Buddhist organizations, the students and the veterans, the Hoat Vu controls demonstrations. At this they are very successful: demonstrators are rarely heard of again.

Some of these thoughts went through my mind when Long suggested a demonstration in Saigon. I knew that holding a demonstration in the capital was really asking for it. But also felt that the country was ready to blow: it was like a pressure cooker with the lid left on too long. Only American power held the Thieu regime in place, and everyone knew the Americans were pulling out. The students and disabled veterans were disgusted with the regime. I decided to go along.

But first Long had to get off the island. So he cut his hair and shaved off his beard and with his “wife and children” in hand, he crossed over to My Tho on the ferry while I set up a diversion to distract the police. Rowing across the river in a boatful of Daoists, I rang one of the island’s peace bells (reconstituted from artillery shell casings) shouting “Hoa Binh™ (“Peace) at the top of my voice. A flotilla of police boats

* Colonel Rheault and several other Green Berets were charged by the Army with the murder of an alleged double agent. All charges, however, were dropped.

* Nung is an ethnic group in Vietnam of Chinese descent.

descended on us, ignoring the ferry and allowing Long to land on the mainland. They took away my bell and turned back my Daoist escort, but allowed me to proceed to Saigon.

We smuggled Long to Saigon in the back seat of a friend's press car. The safest place for Long, for the moment, was Jack Martin's apartment, where Gls often stayed and where there were a couple of carbines, a revolver and some grenades. It wouldn't be so easy for the Hoat Vu to grab Long there.

When we arrived there was a party going on as usual. with about a dozen guys smoking grass and rapping. They had heard about the voyage of the Prajna and thought it was good that somebody was doing something to try to end the war. Like the majority of American troops I knew, most of them were disillusioned with the war. Larry Guthrie worked in one of the Army propaganda units, grinding out press releases about how the Americans were winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people by building hospitals and training villagers. "Sometimes I feel like puking on my typewriter," he told us. Another friend, Larry Russo. worked as a disc jockey with AFVN. and Carl Coven was a chauffeur for a colonel. Jack was an artist.

We sat around on cushions and listened to Long., who spoke very quietly about the philosophy of the Long Hoa. Long said mankind was about to destroy itself as a species on this planet, either by nuclear war or pollution or a combination of both. After the first two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan in 1945, man, he said, had passed the fail-safe point—either he had to change drastically or he would not survive. Hopetully, he said. at the time man developed the technology to wipe himself out as a species, he

would also evolve spiritually.
If man is to survive, said Long. he must do two things—end war, and change his style of life so he won't continue to pollute the planet. Instead of letting technology run amok,

he must control it. But man keeps waging war and making his planet uninhabitable through waste and pollution. The big powers, he said, have simply removed their wars to smaller countries.
"How can we end war?" Jack asked.
"War will end," Long replied, "when the soldier will refuse to fight, refuse to kill his brothers."
We were by what Long said. It seemed simple enough, war would end when the soldiers refused to fight it.
I had heard grunts say many times in Vietnam that the guy with the AK rifle wasn't his enemy, he was just another guy like himself.
Long was an extraordinary man. Most extraordinary. perhaps, was that he hated no one. If I said anything against Thieu, or even the secret police, Long would say, "They are not our enemies." Sometimes I distrusted my own motives in the demonstrations, knowing what I was doing stemmed ;Q from my sense of guilt after seeing the survivors of the My Lai massacre. But Long was the most honest person I had ever met; it was obvious that he wanted nothing for himself, that he loved even his enemies. The Gls were fascinated: for most of them it was the first time they had ever talked to any Vietnamese in depth, and like me, they recognized that Long i

was a rare person. He had the same effect on them as he had had on me and on the Daoists of Con Phung Island.

Long then told of his plan for a demonstration on Christmas Eve. Long and I would go to John F. Kennedy Square in Saigon, in front of the Catholic Cathedral, light candles, and demand that the war be ended on Tet, February 5. Printed copies of Long's speech calling for soldiers of all sides to lay down their weapons on Tet were being smuggled off the island and delivered to both ARVN and Vietcong units by deserters.

The GIs liked the idea—Americans and Vietnamese, hundreds of them. GIs and deserters from both the South Vietnamese

army and the Vietcong, marching together for the first time in the history of the war as brothers, not as enemies.

The risks, of course, were great. The American Army brass would do everything it could to stop it. The Thieu government would never permit the Long Hoa to demonstrate against the war three blocks from the national palace: if it did. the entire country could erupt. But there had never before been a demonstration of both GIs and South Vietnamese. If the Hoat Vu or National Police fired, as they had at the Buddhists and students, and shot American soldiers, the repercussions would be enormous.

The biggest problem was getting word to the GIs, since the military controlled the Stars and Stripes and AFVN, but

everyone in the room agreed to try to help.
One offered to get some leaflets printed up on Army presses; another, a disc jockey on AFVN, said he would try to get word of the demonstration on the air. Then Long went off to recruit among the students at Saigon University and I went off to contact an American civilian antiwar group made up mostly of employees from the religious social service organizations, that had been organized by Don Luce. Still we had no idea how many people would actually show up. I guess we hoped for a couple hundred at best.
When Christmas Eve finally came, we were worried. Reuters had broken the story about our proposed demonstration and many newspapers in Saigon carried the announce-
I ment in the headlines. We began to fear the police might turn
l the demonstration into a major confrontation, which would mean a bloodbath.,
About an hour before the demonstration was due to start, Long and I drove down to JFK Square to check out the police preparations. If things looked too bad, we would call off the demonstration; only people who were prepared to get arrested would go into the square.

We were staggered by what we saw. Three blocks from the square, near the national palace, were a squadron of tanks and about a battalion of combat police with automatic weapons. Lined up in a row of trucks were about three hundred paid counterdemonstrators, “representing’’ the outraged citizenry of Saigon, prepared to come in and bust heads when

the demonstration started. (Thieu had even brought in the out-of-tune ARVN band—-God knows why, perhaps to drown out the noise of the demonstration.) What was worse, the police had put up a six-foot barrier of barbed wire all around the square, leaving only a five-foot gap for people to get in and out. It was a trap. It would be a massacre if we went ahead.

I stopped the car and told Long it would be a wipeout if we held the demonstration as planned. The Americans might be all right, but if Long walked through that barbed wire he would never come out alive. I suggested that I go in with the Americans to do what we could. Nobody would blame Long for not walking into a trap, and the underground could smuggle him out of the country if necessary, perhaps across the border into Cambodia.

“I must go.” he said. There was nothing I could do to change his mind.

Long went off to the university, about eight blocks away to warn the students. A few of them said they were willing to demonstrate anyway, and filed into the square. Meanwhile I went to warn the GIs who had gathered at the Overseas Weekly office. There, I heard more bad news: the American military had declared JFK Square oft-limits to military personnel and confined many of the men to their barracks. Only GIs who lived in apartments could get out to demonstrate.

I told the GIs who had gathered about the preparations at the square, warning them of the danger in going in there. Half a dozen of them agreed to come.

So off we went, seven against several thousand.

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Possibly ever in history have so few marched against so many. But even if we were marching to our own funerals, we were determined to do it right. With Long and myself and Larry Guthrie, the GI spokesman, in front, and the others behind, we walked proudly up to the gap in the barricades, watched in silence—and probably amazement—by the Hoat Vu and the American MPs. TV floodlights hit our faces and newsmen marched around us—infuriated at having to give up their Christmas Eve parties for this tiny demonstration. Some were laughing, but most were pretty angry. ‘I hope they kick the shit out of you,” one of them told me. A friend of mine in the press corps told me we’d have to do something pretty soon or the media would nail us to the wall.

In fact, it wasn’t as bad as I'd feared. About nine Vietnamese students were there from the university, fifteen uniformed GIs showed up besides those who had come with us, and there were about a dozen other Americans from Luce’s group.

Luce and his people were talking and the GIs were spread out all over the square talking to newsmen. Larry Guthrie had just begun to tell the press how angry the GIs were that the square had been put off-limits when suddenly a voice boomed over the loudspeaker: “All military personnel have sixty seconds to leave this square or face arrest.” It was Colonel Keator, the provost marshal, the top military cop in Saigon. Outside the square, Keator had lined up about a

dozen jeeps filled with MPs, all equipped with machine guns and full riot paraphernalia.

Keator had given the press something to bite on. GIs were being denied their right to free speech. The troops were good enough to die for the Great Society but they weren't good enough to have a say about it. The newsmen chased the bewildered colonel around the square like hounds after a rabbit, shining floodlights in his face and bombarding him with questions: "Who authorized you to put the square off

limits, Colonel?" "Is this your way of saying Merry Christmas to the boys, Colonel?" "How come you're afraid of letting the GIs talk?" Keator kept shouting, "See my PIO, see my PIO [public information officer]," and then he would run off in another direction, hounded by sixty newsmen. For a moment it looked as if a full-scale riot would break out between the press and the military. Finally some armed MPs broke through to save their boss.

Larry Guthrie and I staged an impromptu press conference on the cathedral steps. Larry told them he had been denied the right even to go to church on Christmas Eve (the cathedral itself had been declared off-limits) and that the American soldiers were opposed to the war but were not allowed to express their views. Other GIs told the press there would have been hundreds of GIs at the demonstration had the Army not declared the town off-limits and restricted the troops to their quarters.

We decided that our point had been made. Demonstrating

in uniform can get a GI five years in jail. Refusing a direct order in wartime can get him twenty. We held a quick meeting and decided we had got the word out as best we could and getting GIs busted would serve no purpose. As MPs poured into the square, marching off the protesting GIs at gunpoint, I found Long in the melee. I think we won a victory," I told him. "What should we do now?"

"Sit down," he said. "Let's light candles and sing 'Silent Night.'"

So we sat there, the two of us, in JFK Square in the middle of Saigon, and lit our candles and started singing. We sang by ourselves for a while, and then a few other people came and sat down with us, some Americans and some Vietnamese. First there were ten people, then twenty, then thirty gathered in the middle of the square.

After a bit Thom Marlowe came to tell us he had seen the Hoat Vu moving in.

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Although I had known him for only a few weeks, Long and I had become very close. Now I knew it was the end. In a few moments he would be in the hands of the secret police. Before the demonstration, Long had made me promise that no matter what happened, we would not resort to violence, we would not fight back.

So there was nothing to do but wait. I turned to him and said good-bye and he clasped my hand. The Hoat Vu sent five or six jeeps screeching down to the other end of the square to

divert the press, then another group of jeeps came towards us. We were still sitting on the ground singing “Silent Night.” Then the jeeps came in really close and the Hoat Vu jumped us. They were fast and efficient: two of them hit me, highlow like a football tackle, and four more grabbed Long. I managed to get up, but it was too late; they were running with him towards a jeep, four carrying him and two more blocking.

Thom Marlowe got between the police and their jeep, and when they reached him he jumped the whole bunch. Thom weighs about a hundred and thirty pounds, but still one of the Hoat Vu went down. Several of the others started working Thom over. One held a .45 automatic in the air over Thom's head, ready to split his skull, but a UPI photographer was taking pictures, so Thom was safe.

The four men carrying Long ran him into the jeep—literally ran his head into the fender; I could hear it fifteen yards away. Then they threw him into the back of the jeep, beating him as they drove away.

I never saw Long again.

Larry Guthrie and some of the other GIs who had demonstrated on Christmas Eve immediately wrote a letter to Congress trying to get Long freed. “If we are really in South Vietnam, as Secretary of State Rogers recently said, to provide an opportunity for the people of South Vietnam to

determine their own future,” Larry wrote to his home-state

senator, Edward Kennedy, “men like Long should not be in jail. . .. Long is not a person who would try to force anyone into a predetermined future, but Long’s future now seems quite determined. Many of the people I talked to do not expect to see this young Vietnamese again.”

“I also ask,” Larry wrote, “that you work to ensure that American citizen-soldiers be allowed their right of free speech, and that they be allowed to create forums to give their opinions.”

Nothing came of the letters to Congress. The press kept their promise to ‘“nail us to the wall,” reporting that the demonstration was a failure. That meant we could not rely on American public opinion to help get Long and the others out of jail. It seemed we had achieved very little: Long and four others had vanished, the press had wiped us out, and the Army was making sure that no information about Gls demonstrating in Saigon filtered through to the grunts.

I spent a day with Long’s sister trying to get him back from the police, but Saigon was like 1984 come true: though half the international press corps had seen Long carried off, the police denied he was in prison. Long had become a nonperson as far as the police were concerned. He just didn’t exist.

Feeling miserable, I holed up in a friend’s apartment, not daring to go outside for fear of the police. I even kept a carbine with me: if the police started breaking down the door, I didn’t intend to go peacefully.

Then one evening a couple of days after the demonstration,

Thom Marlowe came in very excited. “Have you seen the Vietnamese papers?” he said. He showed me several; all had banner headlines and pictures of the demonstration. All the stories were favorable. It seemed that many South Vietnamese newsmen felt that if Americans were willing to risk their lives for peace in Vietnam, then they too would stand

up and be counted. “Thieu can’t close them all down,” said Tom. “It would look too bad.” Thieu did close down several newspapers, including the major Budahist paper, but at least the Vietnamese knew some Americans had been willing to demonstrate in Saigon against the war.

For a while the Army censorship seemed more efficient. Then one night in January, Sp5 Bob Lawrence departed from his script on his nightly Armed Forces television show. “I have found out,” he said, “that a newscaster at AFVN is not free to tell the truth and in essence tell it like it is. MACV Office of Information has seen to it that all those newscasters who are dedicated to their work are sent to other areas.” The lifer in charge of the station went berserk, but none of the technicians at the station tried to cut Bob off. Bob went on to give several examples ot suppression of the news, including the Christmas Eve demonstration. “We have been suppressed,” he concluded, “and I’m probably in trouble for telling, tonight, the truth. I hope you’ll help stop censorship at AFVN and any other American station under military rule. Thank you and good-bye.”

The Army charged Bob on some trumped-up earlier violation, refusing to let him see a lawyer, and finally reassigning him as assistant to a chaplain. But Lawrence had gotten his point across and at least some of the GIs now knew about the demonstration. Meanwhile, the closing of the Buddhist newspaper had contributed to the rising wave of opposition to the regime among the Buddhists, and the arrest of Long and four others had sparked the first big student demonstration in many months. In spite of growing police and Hoat Vu repression and midnight raids, thousands of students demonstrated in January for a set of demands, including the release of Long and the four others. The demonstration was crushed but it was only the first in a series that built up to massive rioting in the spring of 1970.

My own attempts to free Long got nowhere, and I was to be expelled. Two Army agents had been caught trying to infiltrate the press corps in order to spy on GIs, and the story had broken big in the papers. The newsmen asked the Saigon government briefer at the five o'clock follies what was going to be done. The briefer said he knew nothing about it, but that the South Vietnamese government was going to expel one Richard Boyle for “activities not pertinent to his profession.” As I flew out to Bangkok, I was sure I would never be able to get into South Vietnam again.

Interlude: The Voyage of the Prajna

1971

Return to Vietnam

“You are all going to die,” said the Frenchman.

“Who?” I asked.

“You are all going to die. All the Americans. All of you are going to die.”

“What’s he talking about?” I asked the other man at my table.

“Don’t pay any attention. He’s been saying that for days.”

The Frenchman smiled and shrugged. “You are all going to die.”

It was August 1971 and I was in Cambodia, trying to find a way back to South Vietnam. We were sitting at a table around the pool in the Royal Hotel in Phnom Penh -the Frenchman; a former CIA pilot who had quit over a heroin running scandal*, and me.

> * The pilot, who had flown cargo planes for Continental from Laos to Vietnam, told me he had found out about an American-built runway in northern Laos to service a factory processing raw heroin from opium. Thinking his cargo consisted of guns and food supplies, he opened a crate one day and found heroin.

The front was only twelve miles away from the Royal, a crumbling but still elegant French colonial palace. But all was serene at the poolside. Before the war, tourists had filled the hotel, packing tour buses on their way to Angkor Wat. Then a few months before my arrival the Communists blew up the Phnom Penh airport and put an end to whatever remained of the tourist traffic.

Now, like the opium den frequented by
the Phnom Penh press corps, the pool was neutral territory in
the Indochina war. Agents, government officials, spies, newsmen
and diplomats gathered at the pool to sip cold drinks i
and eat some of the last steaks left in Cambodia. The pool
itself was turning a sickly green because the war had cut the
water supply, but the remains of French colonial opulence
were still present. The waiters stood at attention in the hot
sun, waiting for a snap of the fingers to spring into action.
I had come back to Cambodia on the off chance of finding
a way back into South Vietnam. One day in San Francisco
got a call from Brent Proctor, who had replaced Ann Bryan
as editor of the Overseas Weekly. Proctor, in San Francisco
on vacation, told me that since I had left Vietnam the fraggings
and general demoralization in the Army had increased.
Sometimes, he said, the GIs were fragging the lifers and the
lifers were fragging the GIs, often with no immediate motive.
Most of this was not being reported by the press. We talked
for a while about my going back. I had heard some disturbing
rumors about Long that I wanted to check out-—-that the
secret police had gouged out his eyes; and I also wanted to
find out what was happening on Con Phung Island. Both
Proctor and I thought the South Vietnamese government
would try to keep me out, but there were ways to cross over
from Cambodia. Proctor said he would help. so I decided to
give it a try.

First the Vietnamese consulate in San Francisco turned me down, and I knew for sure I had been blacklisted for what happened back in 1969. Next I flew to Japan, disguised myself as a tourist with a loud hula shirt and an Instamatic camera, and tried again. This time I was given a visa, but it came back from the vice consul with a big “CANCELLED” stamped across it.

I gave it one more try in Hong Kong, where for a price blacklisted people could get visas. This time I told the whole story to a man I'd been told was easy to work with. I let him know I would be willing to part with a sizable sum of money if he would help, but when I came back next day he told me I was too hot. That’s when I decided to fly to Phnom Penh and settle down at the Royal Hotel to wait for something to turn up.

One day over in the pool of the Royal I saw someone hadn’t seen since 1965. “Do you know him?” asked the Frenchman in surprise. ‘“That’s Mataxis. He’s an American general. He runs the show here.”

“Yes, I know,” I said. I knew him six years ago when he was a colonel.”

I went over to the pool, where Mataxis was swimming laps. He seemed glad to see me and we talked for a while about - 1965, when he had been the senior American adviser in [I Corps and had flown me over the Mang Yang Pass in his chopper. Mataxis, now a brigadier general and the highest-ranking American officer in Cambodia, held one of the most

politically sensitive jobs in the Army. He commanded the U.S. Military Equipment Delivery Team in Cambodia—a euphemism for the growing force of American advisers. After the coup against Prince Sihanouk in March 1970, Cambodia's new ruler, General Lon Nol, had called for U.S. aid. A massive U.S.-South Vietnamese force had crossed the border into Cambodia to attack the NVA. In theory, Mataxis told me, there was to have been a pincer movement: the Americans and the South Vietnamese were to attack from the east while the new Cambodian army attacked from the west. (The Cambodian army included CIA-trained CIDG mercenaries from Vietnam like the Cambodians who had saved Bu Prang, and right-wing Free Khmer [Free Cambodia] forces left over from the puppet government set up by the Japanese during World War II.)

But the invasion plan backfired.

Instead of trapping General Giap's army, the attack drove the NVA further west into Cambodia, where they quickly overran the ill-equipped and poorly trained Cambodian army. Then, when the South Vietnamese and Americans retreated, Giap sent his forces back into the old sanctuaries along the border.

Now every time the ragtag Cambodian army came up against the North Vietnamese regulars the Cambodians would drop their arms and run, making America once again a major source of supplies for Giap. Meanwhile, the Communists had

cut Phnom Penh's links to the sea and had taken Angkor Wat in the west. Phnom Penh was surrounded and the economy was collapsing. This was the situation Mataxis had been sent to save.

When I arrived, Mataxis had a command of about fifty men and was laying the groundwork to bring it up to a hundred. Eventually he wanted five hundred men; this number, he said, could do the job. (Apparently the American ambassador disagreed, fearing the U.S. might be involving itself too deeply in Cambodia.) Meanwhile, in the wake of the disastrous invasion, Congress had passed the Hatfield-McGovern Act forbidding the use of U.S. ground troops in Cambodia. By law, none of Mataxis's men were supposed to take part in combat; they were there only to see that the Cambodians used the American weapons properly. But how could they make sure a recoilless rifle was fired properly without going into combat?

Mataxis was staying in one of the bungalows at the Royal Hotel. We sipped beer together in his room one evening and reminisced about 1965. "We had a good army then," he reflected. "It's been the opposite of Korea. There we went in with a bad army and came out with a good one. In Vietnam we went in with a good army and came out with a bad one." Mataxis had been deputy commander, and for a time commander, of the ill-fated Americal Division.

That was the division
in which the Gls had fragged so many of the officers
Then sometime in 1969, Mataxis said, the lifers began their own fragging against the enlisted men. The officers, he explained, had lost faith in the Judge Advocate General's office and had decided to take matters into their own hands.
"What could I tell them?" he asked, somewhat sadly.
I had heard stories of counterfraggings before, but this was the first time I had confirmation from a U.S. general. Thom Marlowe told me in Hong Kong in July that some Gls in the Americal Division had reported to him that some of their buddies had been blown away by lifers in reprisal for fraggings. Brent Proctor of the Weekly had heard similar reports but found them hard to confirm because the brass was so sensitive on the subject.
But what Mataxis was saying was something else. He strongly hinted at a sort of underground movement of lifers, a kind of white guard like the secret organization of Czarist officers who fought the Bolsheviks during the Russian civil war. The lifers knew who the leaders of the Gl antiwar movement were, Mataxis said, and his own junior officers knew "whom to get."
"You know," Mataxis continued, '"our army is like the army of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1917." As defeat loomed, that army, made up of various ethnic minorities—Czechs, Slavs and Poles as well as Austrians and Hungarians—began to break up into bickering and rebellious factions.
There was an obvious parallel, Mataxis seemed to be saying,

with the rise of the black liberation movement in the U.S. Army.

Later that evening we talked about cycles in history, agreeing that America was rushing through a speeded-up version of the Roman Empire. We talked about Spartacus, the Greek gladiator who led a revolt against Rome. With his slave army, Spartacus defeated the best Roman legions: then he marched on Rome itself.

Inside the capital the senators barricaded themselves into their villas in terror. There were more slaves than Romans, and there might be a slave revolt in Rome itself if Spartacus marched against the city. Finally the senators called on the Roman generals to save them from the slaves.

“We will save you,” said the generals, “if you pay the price.”

The price was turning over power to the generals. The Senate agreed, three powerful armies met Spartacus outside Rome and crushed the slaves, and the generals--Pompey, Caesar and Crassus took power.

But the Roman generals had been sure of their troops. There had been no fraggings in the Roman army. What would happen, I asked Mataxis, if an American Spartacus marched on the seat of power? Which way would the army go if civil war erupted in the United States?

Mataxis thought for a moment. The army, he guessed, would break down the same way as the rest of the country - some with the inner cities and some against. Just how many would go each way he didn’t know.

I had heard that many American generals were privately worried about a military catastrophe in Vietnam. With political pressures increasing the troop withdrawal rate, and with anti-American rioting increasing in South Vietnam, the specter of a massacre of the last American troops was becoming increasingly real—a massacre by the South Vietnamese as well as by the NVA. What was the possibility, I asked Mataxis, of a slaughter at the tail end of the war?

"It could get very bad when we get down to a hundred thousand men," he said.

In January 1970, when I was expelled from Vietnam, there had been ten American divisions in the country more than half a million troops. Now, in the fall of 1971, two years after the Vietnamization policy had been announced, there were less than two whole divisions: the 101st Airborne in the

north and two brigades of the First Cavalry between Saigon and the Cambodian border. In I Corps, the Amecrical Division was preparing to go home.

In less than two years the United States had pulled out 80 percent of its maneuver battalions, yet the South Vietnamese army had not increased its strength to fill the gap. The South Vietnamese had the same number of divisions they had in 1965, when they faced military collapse. What worried Mataxis and other American generals was the possibility that two American divisions might not be enough to protect the . full two hundred thousand-man U.S. force, most of which

consisted of support troops and airmen. The South Vietnamese had taken two major defeats in Laos and Cambodia, and with anti-Americanism at an all-time high in South Vietnam, nobody knew if the ARVN could really be counted on to help. Would the South Vietnamese decide to keep President Thieu in power when he was supported only by American dollars and the fast-vanishing American presence?

In the summer of 1971, General Giap had three entire divisions hidden in northeastern Cambodia. By early fall, when I arrived, he had moved an entire artillery division down the Ho Chi Minh trail -rockets, recoilless rifles, heavy mortars, anti-aircraft guns, two or three regiments ot heavy weapons. Who would protect Saigon if Giap decided to attack? In 1969 the Allies had had nearly nine divisions protecting the capital, five of them American. Now, except for a few scattered elements of the Eleventh Armored and two brigades of the First Cav, the Americans were gone. Defending Saigon were the same three ARVN divisions that had been there when I first came to Vietnam in 1965. Two of the three were among the worst in the South Vietnamese army. If it came to a showdown, would the poor ARVN divisions like the 18th and 25th drop their weapons and run, as they had done at Snoul in Cambodia? If even the crack South Vietnamese troops—Marines, Airborne and Rangers First

Division-—were routed in Laos in 1970, what chance would the sloppy 25th have against the best of the NVA?

After three or four weeks sitting around the pool of the Royal Hotel, I became friendly with the son of a high-ranking official in the Philippine embassy who told me his government did favors for the Vietnamese and the Vietnamese did favors for them. After awhile I broached the subject of my visa. “That’s easy,” he said.

“But wait a minute—I’m on the top of their shit list.”

After some discussion he recommended that I invite the South Vietnamese consul out to dinner and ply him with drink. That, he said, was the Asian way. So I bought two bottles of Johnny Walker Black Label and we took the consul out to dinner at the restaurant in the Royal, the best In Cambodia. We got drunker and drunker as the evening progressed and finally I took out some grass (legal in Cambodia) and asked the consul if he had ever been stoned. No, he never had. Did he want to try it? Sure. So I filled a pipe and turned on the South Vietnamese consul. The consul took the pipe and blew through it, spraying burning grass all over the room. After awhile he figured it out and started sucking. A little later his assistant carried him out of the restaurant.

Next day, when I went to the consulate, the assistant told me, ‘‘He’s so happy he’ll sign anything.” Since the blacklists were checked at the airport I still had no guarantee of getting in, but at least I had a visa.

I knew I couldn’t get in by commercial plane so I tried another approach, together with an American woman who was a stringer for a U.S. magazine. The Vietnamese major heading the PR operation was crazy about her, and she was

trying to get him to fix a flight for her on a South Vietnamese Air Force plane to Saigon. Eventually she got the major to arrange it, and I went too.

Return to Vietnam 191

We landed somewhere out in the boondocks and as soon as I checked with friends in Saigon I found out things had really changed. The political situation was very shaky and the government had started a crackdown. Since my visa had never been stamped for entry I was in the country illegally and could be arrested at any moment. I decided to fly back to Cambodia and come in overland.

Even though the war was still going on and scme of the territory between Phnom Penh and Saigon was disputed, you could get a cab driver to take you to the border if you paid enough. So I shelled out the money and got a ride to a border crossing too small to have a blacklist. My visa was stamped: was in legally.

Grabbing a motorcycle bus I finally made it to Saigon. I discovered what my friends had said was right: Saigon looked ready to explode.

The Elections

Outside our window, down below on Nguyen Hue street, the noisy cyclos, with their ancient, clanking engines, spun around the circular fountain. There were hundreds of Hondas on Le Loi street humming past the statue of two South Vietnamese soldiers.

“Here they come,” I called to Don Johnson, whose apartment we were watching from.

There were hundreds of them. They wore steel helmets, mottled brown camouflage fatigues and flak jackets, and each one had a wicker-basket shield—they were the National Police. They began closing off the square below and blocking traffic.

Don came to the window to look out. “They’re getting ready. We better get going.” He started to load his camera.

Don Johnson, a Newsweek correspondent, had the best apartment in Saigon for watching riots, rockets and firefights. It had once belonged to Francois Sully, another Newsweek correspondent, who was killed in a copter crash. Once while Sully was having a party, a rocket blew up a garage across the street (but the party continued). In August 1971 a man had burned himself to death right outside the window. He was holding a poster of President Nixon with a Hitler mustache.

The National Police loaded their weapons with tear-gas projectiles and began to push the crowd back.

“Hear that?” Don said. It was the loud popping sound of tear-gas shell. Then another. I looked out the window and

saw hundreds of Vietnamese running—it looked like old newsreels of the Russian Revolution, with Cossacks chasing the crowds. We could hear more shots as we raced down the stairs.

It was September 18 and the South Vietnamese presidential election was two weeks away. Ever since President Thieu had forced out his two opponents for the presidency- Vice President Ky and General “Big” Minh -the National Police were everywhere. A few weeks before, Thieu had consolidated the various police agencics into a powerful one-hundred-ten-thousand-man force -not a police force, really, but a private army under Thieu’s command.

When it became apparent that Thieu would go ahead with the one-man election—despite considerable pressure from the American government—South Vietnamese students, veterans and Buddhists had taken to the streets to battle the National Police. Thieu’s riot troops had been able to shoot down students and Buddhists, but now some of the leaders of the South Vietnamese legislature were massing to protest. Legislators and other powerful political leaders had taken to the streets to demonstrate against the dictatorship in Vietnam. This was the most serious opposition Thieu had yct faced.

Down in the street Don and I could see the National Police firing tear gas into a group of legislators. Combat police were I ripping down anti-Thieu banners and beating demonstrators with clubs. An assemblyman, Ly Qui Chung, had been hit by gas shell about four inches long and was bleeding badly.

From the terrace of the Continental Hotel across the street from the National Assembly, newsmen were watching the attack on the legislators.

Pointing out the journalists, a police

captain ordered his men to open fire at almost point-blank range. Swirling clouds of tear gas filled the terrace as the gagging journalists raced inside for safety. As the National Police charged the newsmen, Don and I came up behind

them, shooting pictures. The police captain spotted me and ordered his men to fire. One tear-gas shell missed my head by about four feet, crashing against the side of a building.

They kept firing. Don and I tried to make a run for Nguyen Hue street, but we were cut off. I was ahead of Don, running as fast as I could, when I heard him cry out. I turned and saw he was limping badly. As he tried to run, hobbling in great pain, a trooper in flak jacket and helmet took aim at his head. I ran back to give him a hand. My eyes were watering and my lungs burned. I kept spitting, but I couldn't get rid of the taste; it was like after you vomit. Rubbing my eyes only made the pain worse, and I kept gagging.

Squads of secret police were roaming the square trying to pick off stragglers from the demonstrations. A car raced up to two terrified women, tires screeching, and a squad of police jumped out. Gloria Emerson and Tom Fox of the New York Times saw what was happening and ran over. As the police closed in to seize the two women, a captain tried to block my camera lens with his hand, but I managed to get the picture. Then he ordered his men to fire at us with tear-gas shells from a distance of a few yards.

Tear-gas grenades—made in USA—were exploding all

around us. One correspondent fell to the ground but some of us managed to pick her up on the run as the police chased us about a hundred yards down the street, firing at our backs. Thieu had crushed the demonstration; he would do almost anything to hold power, and now everyone knew it. Within a few hours the universities in Saigon erupted, sparking battles all over the city. For the students it was now or never. If they let Thieu get away with smashing a demonstration of the most powerful political leaders, they would have little chance of ever toppling the regime.

Don and I went to Van Hanh University. There, about three hundred students had barricaded themselves in the four-story building. In the command center, the students had tacked up a photo of Thieu. Under the picture were the words '"Ten bac Nuoc'': "He sold out our country."

Outside, surrounding the university, about a thousand riot police were laying siege. Students, with rocks, firebombs and spears, had beaten back the first attack and the street was littered with debris.

The students fought bravely against the heavily armed National Police, but they paid a heavy price. One of the students was shot through the head. A young Vietnamese woman cradled him in her arms, rocking him as she would a baby, her pretty white ao dai splattered with blood.

Now it was quiet again at Van Hanh. The students began filling molotov cocktails and sharpening spears.

At one A.M. the National Police attacked. In a few hours it was all over. The students were rounded up and carried off to the cells of Chi Hoa.

In the coming days, as the secret police rounded up hundreds of students, Buddhists and veterans, rioting increased. North of Saigon, students and veterans battled Thieu's armored unit. In Hue they carried posters showing President Nixon, blood dripping from his fingers, sitting on a pile of Vietnamese skulls. The inscription read simply: '"Nixon's Vietnamization."

After Thieu ordered his National Police to shoot down demonstrators, his own rubber-stamp Senate which had never opposed him before—rose up and, in a dramatic but futile gesture, voted 28 to 3 to demand that Thieu stop the one-man election and quit. As the political situation deteriorated, Thieu became more and more tyrannical, closing down thirty-four newspapers in one ten-day period and ordering his men to beat newsmen and seize their film.

By the end of September all the grass-roots opposition had been crushed.

Thieu had beaten demonstrators, ordered his troops to fire, shot tear gas at his own Senate, and even brought in tanks. You can't fight tanks with molotov cocktails and rocks. As the October 3 election date neared, only one man in the country had enough power to take on Thieu: Vice President and ex-commander of the Air Force Nguyen ;.

Cao Ky. Ky had one thing the others lacked: his own private army of Air Force commandos.

In late September Ky announced a mass rally of all dissident forces outside his villa, about four blocks from the National Palace. Saigon buzzed with rumors: Ky's troops were infiltrating the city, he was going to march against Thieu, backed by the Air Force commandos. Ky became the man of the hour. He began making overtures to General Big Minh, the man who had overthrown Diem. A squad of disabled veterans camped outside Minh's house with posters reading "If you don't act, history will condemn you."

On the morning of the demonstration one hundred fifty people gathered outside Ky's villa. Surrounding the block were hundreds of National Police. Early in the day, disabled veterans supporting Ky began taunting the police, trying to provoke a confrontation. The veterans set up barricades, threw rocks, and poured burning gasoline in the streets. Thieu's police, wearing camouflage fatigues and flak jackets and carrying M-106s, lined the streets like robots, refusing to be provoked. More and more police kept pouring in, blocking off the approaches to Ky's villa.

About a hundred of Ky's troops arrived, screeching up in jeeps mounted with machine guns. The two groups faced off, Ky's army against Thieu's army, with the veterans and about fifty newsmen in the middle. A veteran with one leg began screaming at the police, taunting them, shouting that he gave his leg fighting the VC while the police hung around the capital doing nothing. He was joined by another veteran, this

one with only one arm. Carrying a machete in his one hand,
National Police
**
Marshal Ky's army

he screeched at the top of his lungs at the National Police: “I gave my arm, I’m going to take one of yours.”
The police held back, not knowing whether to shoot, because Ky’s troops were backing up the veterans with machine guns. Then the one-armed veteran walked up to the commander of the National Police, waving his machete. Suddenly he slashed at the commander’s arm, breaking the skin.
The commander jumped back and grabbed his arm, shocked. A police unit set up a .50-caliber machine gun. Now both sides were ready, separated by about a hundred feet, with the newsmen in the middle. “It’s going to blow any minute,” said Don Johnson.
Just then a black limousine arrived carrying a man in clerical clothes-—somebody high in the Catholic Church. The cleric went into a huddle with the National Police, managing to persuade them to back off and so defusing the confrontation. The veterans had failed to spark a fight.
Ky, sitting outside his villa in the rain, looked worried. More National Police were coming in every minute, and still Big Minh had not shown up. Eventually Ky got up to make his speech. In effect, he backed down: he asked everybody to boycott the election. The demonstrators went home and it

was over. The last threat to Thieu was gone.
As the date for the October 3 presidential election neared, anti-Americanism in South Vietnam grew. American cars were burned in the streets, Gls were attacked by mobs, and by the end of September American soldiers were being fired at by civilian snipers. Demonstrators blamed the Americans for keeping Thieu in power against their wishes. To many of them, Thieu was the greatest traitor in their nation's history, more hated even than the Bao Dai, the puppet of the French. Thieu in turn resorted more and more to terror, and riots against American presence escalated.

The spectre of a massacre of U.S. troops by the Vietnamese people caused the U.S. high command to restrict all Gls to their bases during the election. The U.S. Army even had a contingency plan to fight its way out of Vietnam against the South Vietnamese ' army as well as the Communists.
Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese opened up an offensive timed to coincide with the South Vietnamese election. During the late summer, Giap's guns had opened up on the South Vietnamese positions along the northern DMZ. After the fall of a firebase the South Vietnamese command rushed Rangers, Marines and Airborne troops to the DMZ. Together with crack clements of the ARVN First Division, in September the South Vietnamese mobile reserve launched a much-vaunted ''counter-offensive' against the North Vietnamese.

But while the press releases cranked out daily in Saigon told of new ARVN advances toward Khe Sanh, some American generals were becoming quietly worried. The highly publicized invasion force simply couldn't find any North Vietnamese. Where were they?

Some members of the press corps suspected the fighting along the DMZ was a feint to cover a buildup aimed at Tay Ninh province, the traditional invasion route to Saigon from the north. In September I asked the American ambassador to Cambodia at his weekly briefings: "Have you detected any movement of the NVA Fifth, Seventh and Ninth divisions toward Saigon?" He looked puzzled and turned to his aide. After a short conference, the ambassador said "No."

Then Giap began moving his forces. Earlier in the year, when his troops took the key Cambodian junction town of Snoul from the South Vietnamese, Giap captured enough hardware to outfit an entire regiment. Now he began moving toward Tay Ninh. In late September, North Vietnamese sappers launched a five-pronged attack on South Vietnamese positions around Tay Ninh city, killing twenty-two ARVN and losing sixty-six of their own men (according to the U.S. Army). "It was an amateurish job," scoffed the senior U.S. adviser for the ARVN 25th Division. '"The North Vietnamese even shelled their own men."

A few days later, at about three A.M. on Sunday, September 26, elements of the Fifth NVA Division opened up a

heavy barrage of 82 mm mortar fire on Krek, a rubber plantation town and the last major South Vietnamese outpost in northeastern Cambodia. After the barrage, sappers of the Fifth NVA Division hit the South Vietnamese Fifth Rangers and the 25th Infantry Division, but they were beaten off. Supporting the South Vietnamese at Krek were four longrange U.S. artillery rifles at a small base ten miles south, just three hundred meters from the Cambodian border: Firebase Pace. These big guns, with a range of nearly thirty miles, were vital to the defense of Krek—and Krek was vital to the defense of Tay Ninh. Pace, Krek, Tay Ninh: these were the key posts that defended Route 22, the road to Saigon. Without those big guns at Pace, it was doubtful that Krek could hold out. Because the South Vietnamese had no troops trained to handle these guns, the U.S. high command was forced to commit one hundred American artillerymen to man them. Could the Americans trust the South Vietnamese to protect the gunners? Or would they have to bring in more U.S. troops? To admit they didn't trust the ARVN would be a blow to "Vietnamization." To lose one hundred Americans would bring about disastrous political consequences at home. A few hours after the attack at Krek, the North Vietnamese opened up on Pace with a heavy barrage of mortar fire, wounding about ten Americans. In the days following, the North Vietnamese pressed the attack. The South Vietnamese hurled massive numbers of reinforcements into the battle, and even elements of the U.S. First Cav and Eleventh Armored Brigade were rushed to Tay Ninh to prevent the

NVA from breaking through the ARVN defenses and reaching Saigon. In its dispatches, UPI was calling the battle one of the biggest in the war, and the story was making headlines in the States.

But no one knew what was actually happening at the front. Only one photographer was able to get to Pace and then for only a few hours. Most of the reports about the battle came from the command center in Tay Ninh or from the “follies’ in Saigon.

As the October 3 election neared, many in Saigon feared that if the Tay Ninh front collapsed, political discontent, already seething, might erupt. The threat of three crack NVA divisions marching on Tay Ninh-—possibly even on Saigon- while the population was rioting terrified both U.S. and ARVN military strategists. New rumors of NVA sappers and weapons infiltrated Saigon, and Thieu rushed thousands of riot troops to the capital.

Pace was the cornerstone of the defense. Without its big guns, the South Vietnamese fighting in Cambodia would be vulnerable. It Pace fell, Tay Ninh could be next, and thousands of ARVN troops would be trapped in Cambodia.

On Friday, October 1, I went to the five o’clock follies. had been to hundreds of these sessions, and they were always the same: a major or colonel in starched fatigues would get up to the lectern and in a dull monotone describe the day’s actions. That afternoon the briefer got up and said that the

South Vietnamese had defeated the North Vietnamese at Pace, sending the NVA limping back into Cambodia. This is what the press reported to the American people, and in a few days Pace was forgotten.

Firebase Pace

I was having a beer at one of Tu Do street's girlie bars with Dieter Ludwig, a free-lancer for UPI. Dieter had just come back from Tay Ninh, where the fighting had been going on. "Something doesn't add up," he said in his thick German accent. "I don't think they want us to get into Pace. There might be something happening up there." I agreed. So I decided to try to get into Firebase Pace.

It wasn't so easy getting into bases in 1971. In 1969 I could drive up to an Army base in my car, show my press card at the gate, and talk to anybody. But now when a reporter went onto a base he was met by a public information officer. If he said he wanted to do a story on, say, GI unrest or dope use, the PIO would stall him off: "Well, certainly you can talk to the GIs. You can talk to anyone you want to. I just have to be present."

Shortly before I'd returned to Vietnam, John Petersen, a reporter for the *Overseas Weekly*, had done a story on the Army's new heroin detoxification center at Cam Ranh Bay. Petersen had sneaked into the center and talked to the GIs without the Army's knowledge. He found out that the troops could get all the heroin they wanted inside the center. Instead

of drying out, GIs sat around smoking smack. Worse, he found out that GIs inside the center were getting the names of heroin dealers in the States so they could keep up their habit when they got back.

The Army reacted to Petersen's story with a violent attack at the five o'clock follies. "Mr. Petersen's actions were not I authorized by a military official," said the official spokesman. "This act is being investigated by headquarters vis-a-vis the authorities." The blast at Petersen was part of the general harassment of journalists; you couldn't just go onto a base and interview GIs anymore. If you wanted Army transportation, you had to tell them where you were going and why. And if they didn't want you to go, you didn't go.

In spite of the clampdown, I managed to get as far as Tay Ninh by Army helicopter. There the South Vietnamese public information officer for the 25th Division said he would try to get me into Pace. Another journalist, a Frenchman, was trying to get to Krek, so they got a chopper to take us both.

We never made it. When our helicopter tried to land at Pace, the anti-aircraft fire was so heavy the chopper pilot aborted the mission. Instead we landed on Route 22, the highway between Krek and Tay Ninh, to pick up South Vietnamese wounded. There were many of them and they jammed into our chopper, huddling together. A Huey is designed to take six, maybe seven, passengers, but there were

thirteen in our chopper and more waiting on the road. It didn't look to me as if the battle was over, no matter what they reported at the follies.

"I am sorry we couldn't get you in, but we'll try tomorrow," said the South Vietnamese public information officer with a grin. The next day, October 4, we tried again; again our chopper was diverted to pick up wounded. There were even more wounded on the road than the day before. Three times we landed to pick them up and each time there were more waiting. Sometimes we took ground fire, thick orange golf balls flying past our chopper, .51-caliber bullets. The ARVN troops in our chopper were near panic every time the North Vietnamese opened up on us.

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"I'm so sorry we couldn't get you into Pace. We're having bad luck, it seems,'" said the ARVN PIO, still smiling.

"I'd still like to try again."

*It's up to you," he said.

After several hours, the PIO returned and said, 'I got a chopper for you, going into Pace."

It seemed colder than usual in that chopper. I was the only passenger.

"This is Pace," said the South Vietnamese pilot as his chopper hovered over a barren strip of brown earth along a muddy road.

I jumped out and ran for cover, to the amusement of several South Vietnamese soldiers watching me.

"Is this Pace?"

The South Vietnamese commander of the mechanized squadron guarding the road gave me a funny look. “You’re in Cambodia,” he said.

“What do you mean, Cambodia,” I yelled. “Where in the fuck is Pace?”

The ARVN major pointed down the road. “That way, three kilometers.”

“Is it safe to walk?” I asked, and again he gave me a strange look. I asked if I could talk to the Americans at Pace on his radio and he agreed.

“Can I reach Pace by road—over?” I shouted into the radio.

“That’s a negative,” came the reply, adding there were “beaucoup NVA” between the South Vietnamese armored squadron—about fifteen armored personnel carriers—and Firebase Pace, and that I’d be crazy to try to walk it.

“Can you take me?” I asked the ARVN major.

“My orders are to stay here. But we’ll get a helicopter for you in a few hours,” he promised.

Two more days passed. The armored squadron averaged about a hundred rounds of incoming a day. The crews on the

South Vietnamese armored personnel carriers could hear the rounds leaving the North Vietnamese mortar tubes and had a few seconds to scramble into the tracks (APCs). A direct hit would kill everyone in the track, but it was better than standing outside.

On the first night the ARVN major let me sleep in his track, but on the next night he told me I had to stay outside. “There’s nothing to worry about,” he said. He smiled like the public information officer at Tay Ninh.

On the third day I was beginning to get a little touchy. What irony, I thought. “Writer offed by North Vietnamese mortars.” They’d even have witnesses and ‘“Made in China” shrapnel pieces to prove it.

“I want the fuck out of here,” I finally said to the ARVN major. “Tell your commander that I'm walking out of here today.” He smiled and said it was up to me.

That day one of the South Vietnamese had his arm shattered by an AK round and the major called for a Medevac. When the chopper tried to land, the North Vietnamese opened up with a salvo of mortar rounds and the helicopter, a Jolly Green Giant, took off, leaving the ARVN wounded on the ground. I was beginning to believe I'd never leave that place.

The ARVN cavalry was just on the other side of the Cambodian border, about three kilometers from Pace, and each evening we had a fascinating light show. We could hear the artillery from Pace’s big guns whistle overhead and see the arching tracers from the Spooky gunships. The seven-hundred-fifty-pound bombs shook the earth and sent out shock waves. One night there were two B-52 strikes, and the earth heaved as if in agony. Throughout all this the South Vietnamese cavalrymen never fired their weapons. They would just sit up on their tracks, passing their dope in homemade water pipes, and watch the war, like spectators at a

football game. They would comment when a napalm bomb

billowed spectacularly and duck inside when a North Vietnamese mortar round hit too close, but they took no part in the fighting.

The South Vietnamese troops looked upon me as a curiosity. They were very friendly, sharing their food and tea. They laughed openly when I took the first draw on their water pipe made out of a GI peach can.

We ate well. We even had deer one day to go with our steady diet of rice, chopped leaves and canned tuna. The South Vietnamese troops, who wore only underpants, lived off the land. They could get by with only one resupply chopper a week, while the Americans needed thirty.

By listening to the track commander's radio and watching him mark his battle map, I could figure out what was happening. Every time a new North Vietnamese position was sighted, the major would put a red dot on his map. By the third day his map looked like it had chicken pox. I could easily tell that the battle was not going well, despite what the South Vietnamese were saying. The North Vietnamese, I could hear on the radio, were taking a heavy toll of U.S. Cobra gunships over Firebase Alpha in Cambodia. The South Vietnamese have no Cobras, so they have to use American gunships for support, but the NVA had brought in an arsenal of .51-caliber machine guns and even some 37 mm ack-ack guns, which can knock down helicopters with relative ease.

On one day alone, October 6, the Americans lost three Cobras over Alpha. This, of course, was never mentioned at the Saigon follies. (I later confirmed this with the air controller in Tay Ninh and Major Cat, an ARVN Ranger who was there.)

On the afternoon of my third day with the South Vietnamese, one of the men told me a Medevac chopper was on its way in. I could go back to Tay Ninh that evening. As I left, the ARVN major smiled. “You’re a very lucky man,” he said.

Back at Tay Ninh I decided not to depend on the smiling ARVN public information man again, but to try a different way. I was wearing regular U.S. Army fatigues without any markings. I had already shaved my beard and cut my hair, so I looked like any other GI. Wandering out to the helicopter pad, I talked with some South Vietnamese pilots.

“Anybody going to Pace?” I asked.

“Yeah, that artillery major,” said a chopper pilot in a jaunty black flight suit. I asked the artillery major if I could ride along and he agreed.

It was my fourth try to get into Pace and, as our chopper neared .the besieged base, I asked myself again if it was really worth it. No matter how much I wanted to find out what was happening, I felt like shouting to the chopper pilot, “Turn back, I want out of here.” But it was too late.

From the air, Firebase Pace looked like an ugly square brown scar carved out of the thick green forest.

It sat astride Route 22, a muddy unpaved road, and was surrounded by several sections of barbed wire, rocket screens, and an outer trench system three sandbags deep. Even with this protection, the one hundred artillerymen manning the two eight-inch and two 175-mm guns had suffered nearly 35 percent casualties in the first two weeks of the North Vietnamese offensive. Already enemy fire had knocked out one of the big guns, and was gradually whittling down the artillery battery. Something had to be done to protect them, and it was obvious the South Vietnamese weren't doing the job. The fifteen South Vietnamese armored personnel carriers three kilometers down the road could possibly have knocked out the NVA mortar rocket positions, but they didn't move or fire.

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There were also indications that relations between South Vietnamese and Americans at Pace were none too friendly. A heavy layer of barbed wire plus sandbagged defenses separated the two compounds.

When I arrived at the base I introduced myself at the tactical operations center to the first sergeant. Then I met Capt. Robert Cronin, who commanded the company of ground troops sent to protect the artillery at Pace (although, according to MACV, there weren't any American ground troops there). We had a friendly discussion and he briefed me on the military situation at the base.

His company, Bravo, had been sent in three days earlier when another company of the First Cav Division was pulled

out —-which Cronin told me was ‘“normal rotation policy.”
Cronin had a heavy, neatly trimmed mustache, horn-rimmed glasses, and a pipe. If it weren’t for his helmet and flak jacket he would have looked like a stateside insurance salesman or stockbroker.
Cronin was facing a tactical, possibly a political, dilemma. The North Vietnamese had built an extensive underground bunker complex inside the treeline along the Cambodian border, on Pace’s northeastern side. From these bunkers, NVA gunners would quickly set up a mortar tube or rocket launcher, fire, and duck back into their tunnels. Within seconds the Americans would pour out machine-gun fire, followed by artillery and even air strikes; but by then the gunner would have jumped into his gopher hole and scurried through an underground tunnel, emerging about fifty meters away.
All the artillery and air fire the Americans poured on the North Vietnamese seemed useless. The battlefield technology developed by the Americans, representing billions of dollars—electronically controlled B-52s, Spooky gunships which pour out enough machine-gun bullets in a few seconds to fill up a

football field, and all the other gadgets—seemed useless against a few men with a mortar who could pop up at will, drop in a few rounds, and duck back into the safety of their tunnel with virtual impunity. The electronic battlefield, the pride of the American military establishment, was being thwarted by troops using the same kinds of mortars used in

the First World War. Cronin knew it, his superiors knew it, and his troops knew it.

Cronin was very candid: the artillery commander wanted more protection, he told me, and somebody had to go out and get those North Vietnamese rocket and mortar tubes. had seen at Ben Het and Bu Prang that it's suicide to sit back and let the enemy pound your positions until there is nothing left but shattered flesh and mud. Dien Bien Phu proved this to the French.

Somebody had to go out and get those North Vietnamese bunkers, or within a day, maybe two, the enemy mortar and rocket positions would multiply faster than the rats who were also fighting the Americans for domination of Firebase Pace. When the North Vietnamese had enough fire-power to knock out the camp's big guns, they would rain a deadly barrage of fire on the Americans, covering a sapper attack. And that would be it.

While we were discussing the tactical situation at Pace, a mortar round landed about twenty yards from Cronin. "See what I mean?" he said after we ducked into the TOC. "Somebody has got to get those mortars."

Lt. Col. Robert J. McAffee was the operations officer for Firebase Pace, the honcho. He was very military. He stood proud and erect. McAffee didn't stay in Pace at night; he commuted daily in his own chopper.

"Hi, Colonel," I said. '"Can you give me your appraisal of the situation here?"

He said we were “clobbering them, and clobbering them good. We got fifteen hundred bodies.”

“That’s interesting, Colonel,” I said. “How do you know?”

He said patrols were sent out to count the bodies. I didn’t tell him that during the three days I spent with the ARVN in Cambodia I didn’t see anybody going out to count bodies.

“Thank you, Colonel,” I said.

McAffee was an artillery officer and he wanted Cronin to do something about the mortars and rockets pounding his troops. The obvious solution would be to send those fifteen South Vietnamese armored personnel carriers against the North Vietnamese. But the South Vietnamese APCs weren’t moving, and Cronin knew it. Even if Pace were attacked, they wouldn’t move. I knew—I had just been there.

Cronin had a little over one hundred men in his company. Giap had elements of one entire regiment surrounding Pace—around fifteen hundred troops—plus in reserve in Cambodia lead elements of his three elite divisions. To hold Pace against the North Vietnamese 208th Regiment would take at least two more battalions of U.S. troops, and Cronin knew that wasn’t coming: he had to make do with his one company.

From what I could see during my three days with the South Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese were massing around Pace, possibly getting ready for the final attack.

Even an artillery major at Pace admitted the North Vietnamese could take Pace if they wanted to spend a regiment.

Was it worth it to Giap? Cronin couldn’t take any chances. He had to do something.

When I saw Cronin later that afternoon, he told me he was requesting permission to send out a platoon and a couple of squads, about thirty men, that night.

The men at Pace were trapped. The North Vietnamese had cut the road to the north and had massed men along the southern portion of Route 22. I had talked a few days earlier with a U.S. helicopter pilot in Tay Ninh who had been shot

down over Route 22 a few miles south of Pace. An AK round split his co-pilot's helmet but missed his skull as the North Vietnamese opened up with everything they had. "It was bad shit," he said.

From Pace we could see the endless parade of ARVN wounded limping back up Route 22. There was a relief convoy trying to fight its way north on 22, but it was still a long way away. The North Vietnamese had the base surrounded. None of this was ever reported at the five o'clock follies, and the press was telling the American people that the battle was over, a victory for the Allies.

MACYV didn't even admit that Cronin and his men existed, at least not at Pace. To knock out the North Vietnamese positions which were blasting the base from the Cambodian side of the border, Cronin would have needed at least four companies. But politically America couldn't afford another Hamburger Hill. It four companies that didn't even exist were suddenly wiped out, the flak raised in Congress would be horrendous. The brass would also be hard pressed to explain how four companies got zapped in a battle that had already

been won. Once again the military had to compromise between political and military necessities.

The American brass back in Saigon had few options. They could reinforce Pace with more U.S. battalions and push the North Vietnamese back. From a strictly military point of view, this was their soundest move. But politically the pitfalls were too great. They could pull out the two hundred American troops, abandoning the big guns supporting the South Vietnamese in Cambodia. But the military perils of this option were even greater. Pace was the cornerstone of the defense of northern Tay Ninh province. The South Vietnamese didn't have any trained troops to take over the big guns at Pace, and if they were abandoned, the eclite ARVN paratroopers and Rangers in Cambodia would be left without long-range fire support.

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They would still have air power, but they would lack the instant reaction of artillery, and with their morale already low, the loss of that fire support might be all that was needed to create a re-enactment of the rout in Laos and the debacle at Snoul. If the crack paratroopers and Rangers deserted, there would be little chance that the poorly disciplined men of the ARVN 25th Division could stand up to Giap's shock troops. Without Pace, Tay Ninh would be vulnerable; if Tay Ninh fell, Saigon could be next.

The brass had a third option: do nothing. But to do nothing would be to invite military and political disaster.

Unhindered, the North Vietnamese could obliterate Pace, and America in the fall of 1971 could not stand a Dien Bien Phu, no matter how small.

That afternoon Cronin got the word from McAffee. Fifteen men were to go out. Fifteen men against the North Vietnamese 208th Regiment.

Mutiny

Inside Pace, rats and men battled for control. The rats were winning.

There are probably no bigger or meaner rats than Vietnamese rats. They have to be big and mean just to survive, and war-zone rats are even meaner than their city cousins. They are afraid of nothing. At Ben Het I saw rats eat the dead. Kick them in the head and they'd leap for your leg, biting at your boots, scores of them scurrying all around, furry and black.

Thirty years of war had done something for the Vietnamese rat-—made him tougher, better able to compete with man. Watching the war-zone rats, it seemed to me that the rat would eventually claim this planet after the devastation of war and garbage got to be too much. If Vietnam is a harbinger of the future, as many Vietnamese believe, their sorrow is just the beginning of a world apocalypse and we should watch the rats. The grunts put it another way: "We got a lot of bad karma after what we did here."

"Keep the door shut," said the cook, "so the rats won't get in."

Each day it seemed there were more and more rats. They thrived on war. The grunts tried to kill the rats, setting peanut butter booby traps, but for every rat KIA, ten more came to take its place.

From the cook's hootch I could see some of the troops of Bravo Company passing a pipe. They were sitting on a pile of sandbags, and as I watched them I wondered if they were any different from the men I had seen at the battle of Queson, when Alpha Company refused to go back into AK Valley. Then the entire division was close to revolt, but that was 1969, and it was the Americal, not the First Cav, the pride of the U.S. Army.

The one hundred American grunts guarding Pace were cavalrymen, descendants of the fabled horse soldiers who rode with Crook against the Apaches, charged with Teddy Rooseveit at San Juan Hill, and ravaged southern cities with Sheridan. It was the cavalrymen too who with Custer made that fatal charge in 1876 on a riverbank in the Black Hills. The First Cav fought with great honors in the Pacific during the Second World War, and when the Vietnam war began the First Cav was to be a showcase division. With between four and six hundred of its own helicopters, it was the most modern fighting force in the world, a new concept in mobile warfare. The First Cav was worth three Russian divisions, its officers bragged in 1965. It was thrown into the toughest fights in Vietnam: It had been sent in to save the Marines at Khe Sanh. One of its members heralded the division with the song "First Cav, First Team, Always Number One."

"The mess hall doesn't have any sandbags on it," said the cook.

"What?" I said.

“It’s hard to prepare hot meals when there’s no protection. Nobody wants to work in the mess hall—-one direct hit and we’ll get it, bleweee.”

“It must be rough.”

“Sure is. I don’t know how they expect me to do it.”

While he talked I could still see the men from Bravo sitting Ion the sandbags, passing their weed. Some wore flak jackets

and helmets, but most wore only fatigue pants. They were laughing.

“Excuse me,” I said to the cook. “I’m going for a walk.”

I walked over to the grunts sitting on the sandbags, and one of them quickly hid the bowl behind his back.

“Can I have a hit?”

He hesitated for a minute, then broke into a grin and handed me the bowl.

“What are you, man—CID?”

“No, I'm a reporter.”

“No shit.”

We sat on the sandbags, looking out across no-man’s land, toward that ominous treeline, passing the bowl. We knew the NVA were watching us too, but you can’t spend all the time in the bunkers with the rats, you’ve got to come up for air sometimes.

The first round hit about thirty feet away.

“Incoming!” one of them shouted as we scrambled for machine-gun bunker five.

“Shit, man, that was close.”

How close?

We felt safe in bunker five; at least we were protected from shrapnel.

“Asshole dinks, tryin’ to do us when we’re doin’ a bowl,” grunted one of the men as he grabbed a LAW (light assault weapon, which fires a 4 mm projectile) and fired two rounds A at the North Vietnamese rocket gunner in the treeline about three hundred meters away.

“Sit down, man,” said another grunt. “You wanna draw fire?”

It was a very personal war there at bunker five. Only a short distance separated us from them; after awhile we felt we knew each other.

“Incoming!”

Mutiny 225

We dropped to the floor, crouching next to the safety of the bunker wall. That round hit closer than the last.

Nobody saw Hooker get it. He didn’t say anything. The blood pumped out of his temple in quick spurts and then flowed down his face, dripping on his shirt. It’s amazing how much blood a man has in him.

Hooker slowly touched his temple with a jerky movement and looked at the blood on his fingers. Then he looked at us.

“I’m only twenty-one days short. I don’t want to die.”

At first no one moved. We just watched the blood squirting out of Hooker’s temple. It was like a bad dream in which something is happening but you can’t move.

“You’re not going to die, Hook,” one of them said as he gently laid Hooker down. Then some medics carried him to

the medical bunker.

We dove into a safer underground bunker as more shells hit around us. A candle flickered as about eight of us stretched out on air mattresses, hoping the bunker wouldn't take a direct hit from a rocket. Three sandbags may stop a mortar round, but a rocket can cut through a bunker with ease.

Al Grana was Hooker's buddy. Everybody liked Hooker, he always made everyone feel good. "It's the shits, man, Hook getting it," said Al.

We all hoped Hooker would live, but nobody talked about it. We didn't even know how badly he was wounded. Hooker I had talked about going home. '"Whoooeee, I'm just twenty-one days short today," he had said. Hooker, like all the other i grunts, counted off each day left in Nam. Some carved 8 notches on the bunker, others wrote it on their helmets; every man knew how many days short he was. The grunts are scared most when they first arrive and when they're short. The shorter they get the worse it is. They see too many of their buddies get it just before going home. '"Charley ain't lettin' you go, man,'' they'd say.

After about an hour they got bad news: they couldn't get a Medevac for Hooker because the ceiling was too low for a chopper to land.

"They've picked up mass movements of dinks on the radar," said the sergeant. "Maybe up to four thousand, who knows."

“Whaddya think they’re goin’ to do?” one of the grunts asked.
“Who knows, but it don’t look good.”
Then they got the worst news. “Cronin’s sending fifteen men from the Third out at 2100 on a night ambush.”
“You gotta be shittin’ me, man,” said one of the men to the sergeant.
“No shit, they’re getting ready now.”
After the sergeant left, the men talked about the mission.
“They gotta be insane to send fifteen guys out beyond the burr [perimeter]. Fifteen guys against a whole regiment of dinks.”
“If they get hit there’ll be no Medevac.”
“Sure as fuck the ARVN won’t try to help them.”
“Most of them guys are newbies, man, they won’t know what in the fuck to do if they’re hit.”
At first Al Grana didn’t speak. He just listened. Then he turned to me.
“Do you really think anybody gives a shit about us?”
“I don’t know,” I said. “The politicians say they do, but don’t know.”
Grana had a Zapata-type mustache, longer than Army regulation. He had been a student in Los Angeles before becoming a grunt. He was a veteran and he knew the situation at Pace. He knew they were surrounded, and he knew the South Vietnamese wouldn’t help them if they got into trouble. He also knew there would be no American help either, and with the low ceiling there would be no Medevacs or close air support if the patrol got into trouble.

Fifteen men going out against odds like that was suicide. There were

at least five hundred North Vietnamese regulars out there if the radar was accurate, there could be thousands, the entire 208th Regiment.

Grana looked at me again. “This is insanity. The whole thing is just insane.”

None of the others spoke. Grana continued, speaking softly. “Do you think, if anyone back in the world really knew what was going on here, they’d let this madness continue?”

“I don’t know, Al,” I said. “I don’t think they want to know, not really. It’s better for their conscience.”

“There must be somebody who’ll listen. They can’t cover it up forever.”

“They’ve done very well so far,” I said.

We talked for about an hour. I told Grana and the others that I had become too cynical to believe anything could be done.

“I’m sorry, Al,” I said. “I just don’t know what it’ll take to end this war. I hear the vote is coming up in Congress and it’ll be close, but I don’t know. I don’t have much faith left.”

Somebody asked the time. The patrol would be going out in a few hours.

“First Hook got it. Next it’ll be those fifteen guys from the Third Platoon. Tomorrow it’ll probably be us. How many more will it take?” Grana asked me. I couldn’t answer.

He looked at me again. “Somebody’s got to do something to stop this shit.”

Later in the evening when the shelling stopped we crawled out of the bunker and walked over to machine-gun bunker

feet and he was passing them around.

“Fucking asshole Cronin,” snorted one of the grunts as he speared a pig’s foot with his knife.

“Somebody oughta give Cronin a pickled pig’s foot.”

Everybody laughed. In the Americal Division Cronin probably would have gotten a grunt’s calling card that night—a CS grenade, maybe even a frag.

The sergeant who had spoken to us before came over to our bunker in a hurry.

“They ain’t goin,” he said.

“What?” asked Al.

“When Schuler was giving instructions, Chris said, “Go fuck yourself; I ain’t going.”

“No shit,” said another grunt. “That crazy Greek fucker—he’s got balls.”

“What did Schuler do?” asked another.

“What could he do?” said the sergeant. “Then five of the other guys said pretty much the same thing.”

“Whoooeee!” shouted one of the grunts, giving the clenched-fist salute. Some of them slapped skin palm to palm.

“What do you think they’re going to do to them?” one of the men asked the sergeant.

“I dunno. Probably a court-martial.”

That night the men of Hooker’s platoon decided to hold a meeting in the morning and keep in contact with the other platoons. “We got to stick together,” one of them said. “They can’t fuck with us all.” ‘

Next morning we heard in the chow line that Cronin was drawing up court-martial papers for each of the six men who had refused to go on the night ambush. Refusal of a direct order usually got a grunt five years at Leavenworth, and the men of Hooker's platoon were talking about it.

Hooker still hadn't been evacuated, although everybody now knew he would be all right. He came over to say goodbye after breakfast—the traditional Army standby: eggs, bacon, and the mushy brown porridge the grunts call "shit on the shingles."

"Hey, man, you're goin' home. Fucking bastard," said one of Hooker's buddies, glad he was okay.

"I couldn't sleep, it hurt too much," he said. "But I feel all right now."

After breakfast Al Grana came over and asked me whether I'd worked for Robert Kennedy in the 68 election; I told him I'd helped put out campaign newspapers in the Irish sections of San Francisco. He then asked if I knew Ted Kennedy. (I had met Ted Kennedy several times in the campaign, and was with him when Robert was killed, but I doubted he'd remember.)

"Why?" I asked.

"I've got an idea," he replied.

Grana then noticed a photographer taking pictures of us talking. I'd run across him the night before; he was standing over my knapsack with a flashlight.

"Who is that guy—do you know him?"

“Some L.A. Times guy,” I replied. But somehow he didn’t look like a news photographer: for one thing, he had only one lens, and I have never seen a professional war cameraman use only one lens.

Later in the morning Grana and I walked over to the Third Platoon’s bunkers and talked with the platoon leader.

“What happened last night?” I asked.

“Oh, not much.”

“I know about it, Lieutenant. Did you want to go yourself?”

He didn’t say anything, but it appeared he had not been too eager to go on the mission. It was obvious he didn’t want to talk about it, so I spoke with the other men of the platoon. The six that had refused were scared.

From the day a GI takes the oath until he is discharged, he is a cog in the green machine. The lifers run his life, and they keep power by letting the GI know that no matter what he does the Army will always have the last word. He is the Army’s prisoner, GI—government issue.

The lifers knew they couldn’t have an army in which the men decided when and if they wanted to fight. The only way they could keep discipline—and the six men knew it—was to come down hard and make an example of offenders. In the Army’s book of crimes, refusing to go into combat is one of the worst. If the brass let the grunts get away with refusing to fight, the entire system would face collapse. As soon as other units learned that grunts had told their lieutenant to go fuck

himself, they too would refuse orders. The grunts were afraid of dying short, and now most of them were beginning to suspect that the war was short. No onec wanted to be the last man to die in the war.

Chris was scared the most.

“Cronin said he wants to see me,’” he said.

“Good luck,” I told him.

Cronin and the artillery major took Chris aside. Chris scratched his neck nervously as they took turns firing questions at him. I wanted to get a shot of them threatening the court-martial, since I knew from experience how the Army could change the facts around, but I didn’t want them to see me. I pretended to shoot an airstrike, then suddenly swung my camera.

About thirty grunts were standing around talking when I got back to bunker five. Something about them was different. They were the same men I had seen the day before, but somehow they were different.

‘“Hi, Al, what’s up?”

“We just had a meeting with some of the guys in other platoons. We ain’t goin’ to let the lifers do it to Chris and the others.”

“What are you going to do?”

“First of all, we ain’t going to go out beyond the burr. We were ordered to go out on a patrol by Cronin, but nobody’s going. And we had a vote. We ain’t lettin’ the lifers fuck over those guys.”

“Right on,” said a couple of other grunts.

“Remember when we talked last night?” Grana said. “Do you think we could get just one senator back in the world to really listen to us?”

“Ah man, they don’t give a shit about us,” said one of his buddies.

“Do you think Robert or John Kennedy would have listened?” Grana asked.

“I would have hoped so,” I said.

“You know,” Grana said, ‘“before last night I didn’t have any faith in anything working, you know, through the system. But you said there’s a key vote coming up in the House, and that a switch of twenty-five votes could end the war. You gave me some hope, man.” He paused for a moment. “Well, some of us have been talking about it, and we got an idea.”

What, he said, if the men of Bravo wrote a petition to a top U.S. senator telling him what was really happening at Pace? Would it do any good? Would anybody listen?

There was a lot I didn’t have the heart to tell them. Every senator has a huge staff of aides, as many as forty, some of whom do nothing but screen mail. The odds of a powerful senator ever even seeing their petition would be one in a thousand. If reports of My Lai could sit on liberal senators’ desks for weeks, what chance would their petition have of ever getting any attention?

The men of Bravo had another problem. Officially they didn’t exist. They weren’t even allowed to send out mail: if the American people knew U.S. troops were being ordered into the Cambodian border area, the brass could face a storm

of protest both from Congress and the people. So the grunts could be overrun by the North Vietnamese or court-martialed before their petition even got out.

“Who are you going to write it to?” I asked Grana.

“We talked about that, too. Do you think Ted Kennedy would listen to us? Do you think he’d care?”

“Yeah, I think so.” I couldn’t say no.; “ouches man’’—I hesitated for a second, because I knew Grana was thinking the same thing—‘“the lifers will never let that petition out of here. Rebelling grunts, facing death, sending a petition to Ted Kennedy—that’s a scenario the Army brass wouldn’t like to see. They’re going to come down on you real hard.”

“I know,” he said. It was just an idea.”

Grana knew the Army would try to make examples of the six who refused to go, and if the other men in the company joined their revolt the Army would be faced with a growing mutiny. If they couldn’t stop it at the platoon level, they would have to crush the rebellion at company level. If whole companies refused to fight, the U.S. military could face open mutiny in the ranks. He also knew the Army would do everything it could to try to keep the story covered up so they could deal with the men of Bravo without anyone in the outside world knowing about it. A petition to Kennedy if it ever got to him—might save them. But time was running out. They were facing two enemies—the lifers inside and Giap’s 208th Regiment outside. There was only one way to be sure

Kennedy would get the grunts' petition, and that was for someone to take it to him in person. I was the only one at Pace who could do it, and we both knew it.

But I didn't want to. Once the lifers knew I had the petition, they would probably try to keep me at Pace until they decided what to do. They had all the helicopters; it would be a long walk to Tay Ninh. Even if I did get through, I could be picked up on the way to Saigon. My press card had run out

and I was now in the country illegally. They could arrest me and there was nothing anybody could do about it. I also knew the Army might try to trump something up, maybe say I engineered the refusal. Maybe, I thought, that was why that "L.A. Times photographer" kept snapping my picture talking with Grana and the others.

"The chances of you guys pulling this off aren't very good," I finally said.

"I know. But somebody's got to try," he said, looking at me. "Anyway, my chances of ever getting your petition to Kennedy are slim. The Army may try to cover up the story, the press will call me an ego-tripper, and I doubt if I'll ever get past Kennedy's palace guards."

Grana said nothing.

"Okay" I said I"ll try it

I'll never forget their look of hope when the men of Grana's platoon started passing the petition. It passed quickly to other platoons.

"I wonder when the lifers'll find out," said one of the men

in machine-gun bunker five.

“I think they already know—here comes that army colonel, McAffee or whatever it is.”

There were about seven men in the bunker, stretched out. McAffee stuck his head in the bunker, and one of the grunts said, “Here comes the scumba-a-ag.” McAffee pretended not to hear.

None of them jumped up and saluted; in fact they ignored him. They didn’t really hate him, it seemed he was just an intruder. McAffee seemed to feel uncomfortable. He looked at me and said it was very dangerous for me in the bunker. “You know, they have rocket positions in the treeline over there,” he said. “A direct hit would blow this place up.”

Nobody said anything. Then one of the grunts said to me, “You don’t have to go, man.” Another cleared the bolt of his M-16 with a loud clank.

“I’d better move along,” said McAffee. Then he walked outside. The men watched sullenly as he pretended to inspect one of the bunkers, lifting a tarp canopy. “It looks okay,’” he said to his aide, who stuck out his chest.

“What a fucking idiot,” said one grunt audibly. “No wonder we’re in such a mess, with shitheads like that running this place.”

After McAffee left, one of the grunts from the First Platoon came over to bunker five and said there were already forty-six signatures on the petition. He also told us the lifers

were warning the men not to sign it. “A lot of the grunts are scared,” he said.

They had to get a majority of the one hundred men in the company to sign the petition if they wanted to save Chris and the others from court-martial.

“We’ll get the signatures,” Grana said; “I know we will.”

There was now a sense of comradery in Bravo Company. They were all in it together and felt a growing solidarity. Maybe two years before they would have fragged McAffee; now they didn’t have to. They didn’t even hate him. “I just feel sorry for the lifers,” one of the grunts said. “They just don’t know where it’s at.”

They had only contempt for McAftfee and the other lifers. McAffee was playing the movie colonel, but nobody wanted to play his spear carrier, and McAffee knew it. As the hours passed and the men got more signatures on their petition, McAffee and the other lifers were losing more control of the unit. They had to regain that control, and soon. McAffee sent Cronin to bunker five. When Cronin entered the bunker, the men turned away, ignoring him. “I want you all to get shaves and clean up,” he demanded in a military voice. Still the men

ignored him. Then he grabbed a rifle and opened the bolt.

“This thing is filthy,” he said.

“Bull shit. who needs this?” said.one of the grunts, and walked out. The rest gradually left, one by one, until Cronin was alone with one man, trying to inspect his rifle.

After Cronin left, the men returned. “We ought to do

something about that asshole," one said
"He's not worth it," said another. "We've got more important things to worry about."
"Yeah-—like what about the dinks?"
From bunker five we could see out over the tops of the bunkers across the several hundred meters of no-man's-land to the forbidding treeline where they were waiting. They hadn't fired all morning, but every man knew they were watching.
"I wish we could let them know we have nothing against them," one of the grunts remarked, looking out over his M-60 machine gun. "We just want to get out of here."
"Hey, maybe they know what's going on. They haven't fired today."
"Bullshit," said another grunt. "How could they know?"
"I don't know. But they can see us and they can see we ain't doing anything to them. Maybe they'll lay off."
"Yeah," said another. "If we lay off them, maybe they'll lay off us."
The men agreed, and passed the word to the other platoons: nobody fires unless fired upon. As of about 1100 hours on October 10, 1971, the men of Bravo Company, I/12, First Cav Division, declared their own private ceasefire with the North Vietnamese. For the first time since they got to Pace, it was all quiet on the Cambodian front.
Now there were no longer two sides at Pace, there were four—the lifers; the South Vietnamese, who seemed almost to be spectators; the North Vietnamese, possibly massing for a

final attack; and the grunts, who, like the ARVN, were opting out. To the grunts, it wasn't the North Vietnamese who were the enemy, it was the lifers. McAffee knew, when he heard that grunt's bolt click, that the grunts had power. They had the machine guns, the light assault weapons. The grunts outgunned the lifers by about 30 to 1. After taking 30 percent casualties, even the artillerymen who manned the big guns had low morale. If it came down to it, most of them might join the Bravo Company rebellion rather than side with the lifers.

Grana came back from the meeting with the other platoons and reported that they now had over 50 percent of the company. They were bordering on open mutiny. The only thing that could save them now was public opinion.

"What if they try to cover this up, say it never happened?" Grana asked me.

"It's very likely." I had seen them do it before. The world of the Saigon follies was like 1984. When the South Vietnamese were routed in Laos it was a "victory." Thieu and his cohorts were the '"democracy" slate.

"They'll simply say it never happened. How can you have a revolt in a unit that doesn't exist? They'll say I''m crazy, or that I made the whole story up. When it comes down to it, who do you think they'll believe," I asked, "—me, or the U.S. Army?"

"But we've gone too far. There must be a way to let the people back in the world know the truth about what's really

happening here.”

“Hey, man, wait a minute,” said one of Al's buddies. He came back with a portable tape recorder. “It doesn’t have any batteries, but maybe some of the other guys can scrounge some up.’’

“That ik**

“Now they can’t say it didn’t happen,” said Al.

The Grunts

This is Richard Boyle on October 10, 1971, at Firebase Pace about two kilometers from the Cambodian border sitting in a bunker with about a dozen grunts of the First Cav Division. Last night they were ordered ... the Third Platoon was ordered to go on night. . . .*

Let’s kill that and go back.

Oh man, keep it just like it is.

All right . .. ordered to go into night combat assault . . . night ambush . . . several of the men refused to go and none of the fifteen in the patrol wanted to go. This morning several of the men were told they would be court-martialed for . .. what is that for, Chris? What did they tell you you'd be court-martialed for?

For refusing a direct order.

For refusing a direct order. The other platoons, the Second and First, were angered at the fact that the Army picked out a few men to punish. And now several of the men from the Second and Third platoons are in this bunker. What happened?

When we first came here they told us our mission and that was to be on a defensive; but night ambush is an offensive role. And it's plain suicide going out there in the middle of the night.

It's plain fact that the NVA have been mortaring us every fucking ... you know, every day. And they hit us with ... one guy got ... in John's squad there, one guy got wounded in the shoulder and in the head yesterday by a rocket. Right in this bunker.

A lot of the people are kind of wondering if anyone back in the world knows that we're out here, you know. Like they say that only two batteries artillery are supposed to be here but no grunts are here. We don't even exist. We're just meat.

I heard that your platoon may go out tonight.

Right. The Second Platoon is supposed to go on night ambush.

Are you going?

No.

The Second Platoon is not moving from their bunker.

Fact is, they might lay off, they haven't shot any today. If they lay off, once they know [we're not firing] —they got FOs [Forward Observers] out there. Soon as we start going out there, we're sitting ducks, man.

You haven't got any rounds all day and you haven't fired.

It's kind of like a private cease-fire?

That's true. Yesterday night they fired two rounds in. We jumped up and fired LAWs [light assault weapons] and threw everything we had at them, and as soon as we do that they start firing rockets right back at us. Like today we haven't

done nothin' but sit here and wait, and they haven't done anything either. It makes you kind of wonder . .

Makes you wonder—when you have an airstrike and right after the airstrike, about fifteen seconds later, the dinks shoot right back at ya.

What'd they tell you this morning, the captain and the lieutenant?

Well, he says not to talk to the press.

He called us in one at a time, man, trying to—

He said not to talk to the press. He said the strike wasn't

called off 'cause we refused to go; he said it was because ARVN was out there. He said we was goin' out today.

Are you going out today?

That's what he said.

I'm not going out today.

I know they told you not to talk to the press, but did they l tell you they were going to court-martial you?

He told me he'd give me time to think about it. I told him, 'man, I've thought about it all the way over here. I wasn't goin' to jeopardize my life. Nine times out of ten I got a good chance of not coming back.

I just been in the country three weeks. They try to say the old guys influenced me. When I been here for three days I saw what's goin' on for myself. It's suicide going out there. ARVN comes back all messed up, no arms, no legs. And they want us to go out there.

Sixteen men go out there at night. We don't know what's

out there, could be booby traps, could be anything. We don't know.
Let's face it: if B-52 bombers can't knock 'em out, and
napalm can't knock 'em out, what are we going to do?
What can fifteen men do?
We know they got .51 cals out there.
They got choppers down.
Not only that, we're not even supposed to be out there.
They could see us, but we can't see them. They could see
us leave and just wait. Once we get outside they can come in
behind us, cut us off, then get us from the front and back.
You can't call for air support, 'cause it won't come in here.
We're not mad just because of this, though; we're generally mad.
Back home the people don't know what the hell's going
on, either. They're just deceiving the people.
You think the people don't know the truth of what's going
on here?

People that go home on leave [say] everybody says, How's
things back in the barracks over in Vietnam? What barracks?
We sleep out on the ground.
No one in the rear believes it. Even the MPs won't believe
that we're out here.
No, we never heard about it until two or three days before
we got here.
They told us we were coming to rescue some grunts.
They left and we're still here. They didn't say anything
about going outside this burr. It didn't have anything to do

with going outside.

All we were supposed to do was pull bunker-guard.

We're not supposed to be fighting this war anyway. We're supposed to be turning it over to them.

You can tell they don't have their hearts in it, man.

They're being pushed out there and they come running right back.

Do any of the people back in the world know that [Defense Secretary] Melvin Laird said something to the effect that our combat role had ended? And the fact was we were still in the bush, man, when he said that.

Seven people got hurt one day in an ambush and that was the day it [Laird's statement] was in the newspaper.

Yesterday when Hooker got it in this very same bunker it didn't seem like combat was over.

See that hole up there in that screen? That's where the shrapnel came through here.

Man's got twenty-one days left in the country and they got him out here.

What happened to him?

He got shrapnel in the head and the shoulder and they wouldn't Medevac him 'cause it was low ceiling and they wanted to send out a patrol and then what would happen?

It was kind of useless to send out a patrol. When the patrol got out we couldn't support them from back here ...

couldn't get a medic out there, couldn't get no support out there. There's not a thing you can do out there with small arms.

We had a helicopter crash out here. We still got three GI bodies. They still haven't got those bodies.

Do you believe the people in the United States are finding out the truth about what's happening?

No. There's no way of finding it out.

I don't think I'd be here if they did.

Everybody covers it up.

I mean, you get letters from home, they be thinking you back in Saigon.

You don't want 'em to know any different. You don't want 'em to worry.

They don't think of what's happening. Did you know there's no doctor here?

Do you think you've been forgotten by the American people?

Yeah. I think we have been. Maybe not by our families, but what can they do. They can't go out and do that much, 'cause they're a minority.

What's worse, we're not being supported. We have a short age of ammunition. We have a shortage of everything. Once we didn't have a medic. They sent us out without a medic, I out in the field. We almost revolted then. We should have.

Yeah, and then they tried to teach a guy in two hours how to be a medic.

One hour.

One hour? One-hour crash course.

Couldn't believe that.

Learned a lot, didn't you.

Yeah.

Well, look here. Why are you over here?

'Cause I didn't want to go to prison.

This stinking, fucking war.

Everybody over here don't know why they're over here.

It's not accomplishing anything. I mean, you see what you

do. Have you ever accomplished anything out in the bush?

You go out there and you make contact, but do you accomplish

anything really? Every time you go out, the same—

We captured the black-market flour that the VC bought

off the black market in Saigon.

Yeah, tell them about that.

Made in Seattle, Washington.

Sixty-four tons of flour.

It was sent over in June 71 from Seattle, Washington.

They left it on the pad overnight and the dinks came right

back and stole it.

I heard the ARVN are stealing your food.

They always steal our food. The ARVNs go out and get it

and we can't get it back from them.

We aren't rebelling just against going out on night ambush.

We're rebelling against the whole situation, being stuck out here.

Do you think you're fighting for democracy here?

How can it be a democracy with a one-man election?

Yeah, what kind of democracy is that?

Everybody knew what it was about. Everybody knew that

election was phony.

Election—it was no election.
You didn't have anybody else to vote for.
It's always the higher highers, man, they don't have to go out there. They just send wus out there. They get to sit back here and talk.
It's easy to tell someone to do somethin', but it's a different story when you have to go out there yourself.
Just playing games out there.
Playing with human lives.
The Army said in the Stars and Stripes that the battle here is over.
Do you believe that?
It's obvious we're being surrounded.

Every bird that came in here yesterday got shot at.
It's a proven fact that it's not over, 'cause we had one guy messed up yesterday.
You're about the first reporter or any type of person connected to the press we've talked to.
Yeah, they bring people over. Even, they brought these football players from the NCAA and they had a lifer with them so we couldn't rap with them and tell them how it really was.
All they see is the good part.
What'd that sergeant major tell y'all -not to talk much?
Yeah, don't hang out your dirty laundry.
Another thing, man. I brought some peace shirts back to the guys, and the NCO won't even let us wear them just

’cause he’s against peace.

He calls us hypocrites ’cause we wear peace signs. Like we wanted to come over here and fight. Like we can’t believe in peace ’cause we’re carrying an M-16; that’s utterly ridiculous.

I always did believe in protecting my own country if it came to that.

Yeah, if it came down to that, but—

But see, I'm over here fighting a war for a cause that means nothing to me. It means nothin’ but my life, and life’s a very dear thing to me, man. I have a hell of a lot to go back to.

Do you think they’d court-martial the whole company?

I doubt it.

It’s a possibility.

That’s what it’ll have to get down to. They’ll have to court-martial the whole company. I said right away they can start typing up my court-martial.

If they was expecting us to go on patrol, why didn’t they give us that acknowledgement before we left? When we left 8I we thought we were coming out on the primary mission to pull defense perimeter guard on Firebase Pace. We weren’t supposed to be operating outside this perimeter. That was the

intention that I had before I left. Now we get out here and they want us to go on a fifteen-man ambush.

You know, there’s a thing about giving an order, and there’s a thing about using your head, too. It’s really like everybody’s insane. It’s a suicide mission. You’re just not using your head when you order fifteen men to go out there

when they know goddamn well there's mortar tubes out there and there's probably around five or six hundred dinks and they tell fifteen men to go out there. That ain't using your head.

Back in basic training they said all you can use in Vietnam is common sense.

Do you think you'd be alive if you went out last night?

No, man.

If you go out there at night, say you take thirty or forty men, they'll never find you no more. That'll be the last they see of you, once you walk off this firebase. 'Cause if they can't go out there to get those dudes out of that chopper that crashed about four days ago, they ain't going to go out there looking for you in the jungle, man.

Who's going to go out there and get us?

In order for them to get you they got to send somebody else out, so they gonna just leave you there.

They ain't thinking that far ahead.

Imagine the ARVNs coming over there and rescuing us!

ARVNs don't even go after their own men, much less us.

Yeah man, do you think they'd tried to cover it up?

That's all they'd do, I bet.

Nobody would even hear about it.

People back in the world wouldn't hear about it.

We don't have sufficient equipment to survive out there. Each man takes his basic load of ammo, leaving his rations and stuff behind. He'd go out there and make contact. He's going to burn all that stuff up and then can't get support

from his friendlies.

The Grunts 245

You know, the biggest thing about it is most guys go home next month.

The thing is, we're all getting short.

Look at it this way, man. If you went out there and something happened to you, like I was saying, you think people back there in the world would ever hear about it?

That's freakin' me out, man.

And they always say the grunt or the enlisted man is always the one who screws it up. It's never the leader. We're always the one, we always screw up, not them.

He [Cronin] was talking about the reputation of the company. He said that if we talked to the news media and told what was going on, the news media would distort it and twist it up, and would destroy our company reputation.

Our company reputation don't mean shit.

They told me last night they were bringing in a battalion of ARVN some time today. They was supposed to be operating in this area. Okay, if we refuse our mission last night, then why can't the ARVN go out on that patrol today? Why is it necessary to send the platoon out there?

'Cause the lifers want to get the body count. They don't give a damn if it's GI bodies.

They want some brownie points, that's all they want.

Get their cards punched.

They ain't gettin' them punched with my carcass.

Or my carcass either.

Actually we're in a defensive role, so really we're not disi'
obeying an order at all by not going out, 'cause we're just
trying to play our defensive role like we're supposed to.
Just using good common sense.
It's just like we're so isolated, we're isolated from every-
body, we got nobody to back us up. Who's going to back us
up when we try to do something?
People in the world aren't going to back us up, 'cause they
don't know about it. And we're sure the lifers aren't going to

back us up, 'cause they don't give a shit about us. They come
to you and they're nice when they want something to get
done, but they'll just stab you in the back any other time.
They might do it in the future if we don't stop 'em now,
you know. Keep sending out small patrols. You can do it
anytime.
You guys were firing into Cambodia, I understand, so in
effect you're violating the law already.
Right, that's one way of getting around it. They put us
right next to the border and let us fire into it.
Six [a sergeant] comes around the other day and tells us
that woodline is in Cambodia.
Yeah, he wants us to go into Cambodia.
Here they got us—well, outnumbered isn't the word for it.
It could be a division out there.
They don't even know what's out there, could be anything.
They don't know.
They got to do something pretty quick. Long as they let

them mortar tubes stay out there, they could be bringing in more and more stuff, man, then they'll really be doing us.

Then why don't they bring more people, some tracks and tanks, and just rip the hell out of the place?

They should run an operation through here, man. Bring about a couple of divisions of ARVN up here. -

There's an ARVN armored group, about fifteen of them, three kilometers down the road. Why do you think they haven't come up here to help?

"Cause they don't want to get fucked over, that's why. It's mechanized now, they got armor about two or three inches thick. How thick is this shirt? Wow.

It was funny the other day when Hook got it. He had his flak jacket on, his steel pot on, and he was inside the bunker, and he still got it.

Now we got the petition.

So what'd they say now?

They're tellin' 'em not to sign the paper.

See, they got us scared.

There's a few people that don't want to stick together on this, so what can we do?

Somebody want to read that, man?

Here, John, read it.

Read it for the tape.

Okay, this is the letter we're sending to Senator [Edward] Kennedy:

We the undersigned of Bravo Company, First Battalion, Twelfth Cav, First Cav Division, feel compelled to write

you because of your influence on public opinion and on decisions made in the Senate.

We're in the peculiar position of being the last remaining ground troops that the U.S. has in a combat role and we suffer from problems that are peculiar only to us. We are ground troops who are supposedly in a defensive role (according to the Nixon administration) but who constantly find ourselves faced with the same combat role we were in ten months ago. At this writing we are under siege on Firebase Pace near the city of Tay Ninh. We are surrounded on three sides by Cambodia and on all sides by NVA. We are faced daily with the decision of whether to take a court-martial or participate in an offensive role. We have already had six persons refuse to go on a night ambush (which is suicidal as well as offensive), and may be court-martialed. With morale as low as it is there probably will be more before this siege of Pace is over.

Our concern in writing you is not only to bring your full weight of influence in the Senate, but also to enlighten public opinion on the fact that we ground troops still exist. In the event of mass prosecution of our unit,

n our only hope would be public opinion and your voice.

[Signed] *

Sp4 Albert Grana, Sp4 David L. Pawpa, Sp4 Derek Paul, Sp4 Reuben Topinka, Sp4 John T. Van Belleghen, Sp4 q, Michael McNamara, Sp4 Danny K. Cooke, Sp4 Thomas

J. Bohning, Sp4 Edwin T. Karpstein, Pvt I Steve J. Ariganello, Sgt. Phillip D. Thompson, Sgt. Morris Bloomer, Sgt. Steve Britton, Pfc. Mike Moore, Sgt. Phillip D. Grandmason, Sp4 Dennis L. Tvar, Pfc. Royden O. Thomas, Pfc. Ronald James Patrick, Sgt. George J. Corey, Jr., Pfc. Thomas L. Kendall, Sp4 Jerry L. Frame, Sp4 Dale L. Nichols, Pvt. Robert C. Tyon, Sp4 David L. Gibson, Sp4 Christos Panoutreleos, Sgt. Nick Demas, Sgt. James Shaffer, Sp4 James P. Stevens, Ernest French, Sp4 Lawrence L. Savage, Pfc. Bernie McKenzie, Pfc. Stuart Wilson, Sgt. Jerry Yancey, Pfc. Alfred F. Thompson, Pfc. David McPibbons, Sp4 Richard A. Neighbours, Sp4 Raymond D. Hoffman, Pfc. Charles D. Coulson, Sp4 Rocky D. Gill, Sp4 David L. Sherman, Sp4 Ceaser Hastings, Sgt. Walter L. “Tex” Weruli, Sp4 Steven Fugati, Pfc. Walter M. Payne, Pfc. Asquith B. Willis, Sgt. Robert L. Jones, Pfc. Teddy J. McGhee, Sgt. Gary J. Duderhoeffer, Sp4 Donnie H. Clements, Pfc. Randy L. Abernathy, Sp4 Joseph D. Parovich, Pfc. Chandler, S. Sgt. David A. Swallow, Pfc. David A. Lewis, Sp4 Carlton Powell, Pfc. Lacy S. Ward, Pfc. Samuel Johnson, Pfc. Richard E. Peacock, Pf¢: David W. Park, Jr., Sp4 James H. Essick, Pfc. Charles Connell, Sp4 Harry C. Strieker, Jr., E-I Kenneth K. Turner, Sgt. David A. Parr, Sp4 Joe DeMann.

* The names have been copied directly from the signatures on the petition and may not in all cases be accurate.-ED.

Does anybody know what we're fighting for?

Actually, I tell you, the only thing you fightin' for is your own life. You fightin' to go back home, and you got to fight your way outta here. You can't go out there and just give it up. You fight for yourself, man. I know I am fightin' to go home.

You be out here in the bush fightin' the VC and NVA and you go to some city in Vietnam and then you be fightin' the Vietnamese people.

Can't send any mail out of this place, I don't know why.

We don't get any mail.

Do you think they're trying to hide the fact that you're here?

Yes.

No mail, no support, no nothin'.

A grunt comes into the bunker and says: They had a Cobra shot down. The pilot and copilot both got hit.

They got shot down today?

Fifty-one caliber.

They're shootin' down our birds all the time, just like a popgun.

Have you guys fired today?

No.

Why ?

Won't mess with them if they don't mess with us.

So they haven't fired at this bunker all day, and you

I haven't fired at them.

That's right.

We're not going to do it, either.

You get the feeling sometimes that they don't really want

to fool around with us that much, unless we fire back.
They want us out of here, that's for sure.
Let's go. [laughter]
Couldn't take these guns out. I don't think they want
these big eight-inchers out of here. VC want them out and
the lifers wants them in, so we gotta stay here.

250 Flower of the Dragon
Didn't the petition start after they tried to single out six
guys for court-martial?
That's right.
How do you feel about that, picking out six guys for court-martial?
It's rotten. They're trying to separate us, trying to keep it
from being unified. They know if we're unified they can't do
anything. They can't court-martial the whole company.
Just isn't six people that don't want to go out there,
they're just trying to blame it on six people.
There's no way you can court-martial the whole company
and keep it out of the papers and out of national attention.
You can do it with six guys, and no one'll ever hear of it
except the Stars and Stripes. But if you court-martial the
whole company it's bound to get out.
These are the men who were just rapping.
John Van Belleghen from Cleveland, Ohio. I got seventy-five
days left.
This is Derek Paul from Munster, Indiana. I got about
ninety days left.
Reuben Topinka from Chicago, Illinois. I got fifty-one.

Ceaser Hastings from Atlanta, Georgia, and I have about two hundred and seventy five left. Second tour. Believe me, I knew what was going on, I sure regret volunteerin' for a second tour in this scumbag, but I'm here now and so I gotta play my part, but 'm not goin' there just to give my life away, not just like that.

David Pawpa, and I'm from Oklahoma City. Got fifty-five days left and can't wait to get out of this place. It's a bummer, man.

I''m Robert Jones from Atlanta. I just got in the country again, was here part of the first tour, went in for reassignment back in the world for some hardships and they were disapproved, so I'm back over here again. Maybe about two

hundred days left. Soon as it's over I plan on makin' it back to the world. And I'm not goin' to do anything stupid, not to make it back.

I'm Sp4 Albert Grana from Los Angeles, California. I got fifty-one days left.

I'm Pfc. Payne from Baltimore, Maryland. I got three hundred and fifty days left.

Sp4 Danny Cooke. I got about sixty days.

At this point we left the tape recorder on while the men went about their usual routine in machine-gun bunker five. Some were reading the Army's newspaper, the Stars and Stripes, while others filled sandbags. Their cease-fire was still in effect, as the men walked about openly without helmets or flak jackets. We didn't know how long it would last.

What's it say there, man?

“ .. Americans at Firebase Pace took a shelling attack without . . .”

Oh, that’s a lie, man.

They say we took two shelling attacks without any casualties.

Which day is that?

Look at this, man: “NVA gunners fired one 82 mm mortar round . . .”

One round —we got about twelve or thirteen rounds.

Oh, the way they lie in these motherfucking papers.

Is that incoming?

No.

YES!

INCOMING! INCOMING!

Told ya.

Fifteen seconds. Fifteen seconds. Usually it took about fifteen seconds between the time we could hear the mortar pop out of the tubes in the treeline until it would come crashing down on us.

———

There is a loud explosion as the bunker is peppered by pieces of shrapnel.

Hey, that was a rocket.

The bunker’s M-60 machine gun opens up on the North Vietnamese gunners blasting at the treeline.

Have they set that .50-cal. up yet, man?

Was that a rocket or mortar?

A rocket.

Is that tape recorder still goin’?

Dig it.

It’s got mud on it, but it’s going.

Hey, where’s that .50-cal. ammo, Tom?

They haven’t got any ammo up there yet.

Hey, what you got there?

I look at my hands, they re bleeding. Shrapnel.

Shrapnel?

Maybe you better go check with the medic.

Hear that last one coming in a few minutes ago?

Rockets.

Right over us.

I heard one come in.

Have they set up the fucking .50 yet?

I thought maybe they’d leave us alone, man.

They should know better than that shit.

Somebody fire?

No, I don’t think so.

They shot at us first.

There is a loud boom, and the ground shakes. It’s one of Pace’s big guns firing.

Going out!

Get down. Get down, chief, dammit!

Shootin’ direct fire out there.

Several men were hit earlier by shrapnel fire from our

own guns. They were firing at three hundred yards.

Another loud explosion is heard.

What in the fuck was that?

Secondary explosion, man.

You okay, man? to me.

I see you got some shrapnel.

I think so, I don't know what it is. I didn't feel it.

Shrapnel from what? That round?

You want a medic?

No.

Incoming.

INCOMING, MAN, INCOMING!

Straight out.

Rocket or mortar?

Those are mortars going out?

I just told them they hit the fucking ARVN compound.

They're trying to hit that fucking bird out there. Get a

direction and how many rounds.

HERE IT COMES!

Bunker six, incoming.

Get a direction, man.

[More machine-gun fire.]

Get down, man.

How far out?

About twelve hundred.

That was close, man.

Yeah. Rocket, right over the top of us.

We got more shrapnel, man—look at the holes in that thing.

Incoming!

You all right, Al? They're coming beaucoup close, man.

Where'd my fucking pot [helmet] go, man.

They got three guys wounded over there.

They got two squads out there securing that Cobra.

Tell 'em to stay in their fucking bunkers, man.

They're sending infantry out?

They want some dudes to go out to the woodline now.

256 Flower of the Dragon

Hey, that was fucking recoilless-rifle fire. Check that out.

That'd fuckin' destroy this bunker.

Is there a helmet around here, man?

That freaks me out, I lost my cigarettes.

We got to get that fucking .50 set up.

The men go back to reading Stars and Stripes during a lull in the shelling. One of the grunts is reading:

"... NVA gunners fired one 8 mm mortar and seven rounds of ..."

Ahhh, kiss my ass.

Going Home

After we finished the tape, Al Grana handed me the petition with the sixty-five signatures. It was two-thirds of the company, more than anyone had expected. Time was running out. If I was ever to get out of Pace, it had to be now.

Grana shook my hand the way grunts shake hands, clasping the thumb.

"I hope you can make them listen," he said.

"Good luck."

I shook hands with each of the other men in the bunker

the same way.

Without stopping by the TOC, I rushed to the gate where the downed Cobra gunship had crashed. Another American chopper had landed about fifty meters away, apparently to cover the Medevac ship which was coming to get the Cobra pilot. As I ran for the chopper I could see the pilot lying there, waiting. Most of his leg had been shot away.

The chopper pilot agreed to take me to Tay Ninh and we took off, gyrating wildly to avoid the North Vietnamese groundfire. We landed at the 25th Division headquarters. I wanted to avoid the smiling ARVN public information man so I hitched a ride on a Medevac chopper to a second base at Tay Ninh, where the wounded were brought in from the choppers to the waiting ambulances. A steady procession of dead and dying. The choppers would wait long enough for the human cargoes to be emptied and then they would fly off again for Krek or Firebase Alpha.

I got a cyclo into town and managed to catch a bus for Saigon. The ride took about three hours. Every time we were stopped by the South Vietnamese police, I expected to be tapped on the shoulder and asked: “May I see your passport, please.” I was hoping the lifers at Pace wouldn’t find out I had left until I was safely on my way to Saigon, but that was too much to expect.

If I made it to Saigon I would have to make a decision. The North Vietnamese were massing around Pace and they

could attack at any time. I had to get Bravo Company out of Pace, and the way to do that was to break the story. Kennedy might do something to get them out. But I had to get out of Vietnam before the story broke, because I knew the authorities wouldn't let me out with that petition if they could stop me. And since I was now in Vietnam illegally, they could throw me in jail. I also faced another danger. If I gave the story to the wrong man, he might simply call up the Army, ask if it were true, and, if they denied it, kill the story. That would alert Thieu and the CID that I was carrying the petition, and if they got to me before I could get the petition out, they could suppress the story.

When I got to Saigon I went to see Don Johnson. I wanted to break the story but I didn't know how, so I suggested a press conference.

"Don't be an idiot," Don said. "If you try that they'll come in and bust your head. You'll never get away with it."

He suggested giving the story to a reporter from a Chicago daily, but I wanted to give the story to a journalist I could trust. So I called one of my closest friends, a young Frenchman, Roland Paringaux of Agence France Presse. Roland and I had become good friends in Cambodia, going to Svay Rieng together to do a story about South Vietnamese atrocities. He was outraged when he learned that South Vietnamese Rangers raped and pillaged in Cambodian villages. They had

even used one village for mortar target practice, but he was one of the few newsmen to report it. Except for Alan

Dawson of UPI, one of the top Vietnam journalists, most of the American correspondents didn't think South Vietnamese atrocities in Cambodia important. '"The Rangers do even worse to their own people," said a correspondent for one national magazine, sloughing off the story.

I trusted Roland and I knew he would write an honest story. While I talked he typed out the story and within a few minutes it was on the wire, going all over the world. "This'll really stir up the Army," he said.

After he finished, Roland said, "You know, when this breaks they'll probably be looking for you."

"Yeah, I know."

"Look, Rich," he said, '"stay here. You'll be safe. I don't think they'd dare break into a French news agency."

The next morning I took the tape to Art Lord of NBC News. After hearing the tape, Art said, 'Do you think you'll be about to get out of here with this?"

"I don't know. I'll sure try."

"Are you ready for the Bell Telephone Hour followed by a little game they call Truth or Consequences?"

The "Bell Telephone Hour" was a Hoat Vu torture. The prisoner is stripped and strapped to a chair, and two electrodes are attached to his testicles. The interrogator can increase the voltage at will.

"The problem is getting you out of here in one piece," he said. "Look, we got a guy who works for us who can do miracles. Give me your passport and we'll try to get you an exit visa."

Every news agency in Saigon has at least one Vietnamese on the payroll who does nothing but take care of correspondents' documentation, entry and exit visas, and other bureaucratic hassles. I didn't think there was much chance that Thieu would let me out, but it was worth a try.

Later that afternoon, I went back to NBC to find out about my exit visa.

"I've got some bad news for you," Art said. '"The Department of Immigration said it will take at least four days for you to get an exit visa."

My only chance of making it was to get out of Vietnam before the story broke. Once it hit the Vietnamese newspapers, I was sure they'd do something. I had to talk with Don, although it was risky to try and see him, since his apartment would be the first place the Hoat Vu would be watching.

I was beginning to get really scared, so I decided to make a move of my own. Across the street from Don's apartment was the national press center phone booth. I decided to call everyone I knew who could help, even though I knew the phone was tapped.

When I crossed the street back to Don's apartment I was followed by two Vietnamese, one carrying a walkie-talkie. Both wore white shirts outside their pants, probably to hide their .38s. Hoat Vu.

They got into the elevator with me. I expected it right then, but they made no move to grab me. They followed

about fifteen feet behind until I got to Don's apartment.
When I looked back, they were waiting.
"If I were you, I'd stay off the streets," said Don. "And whatever you do, don't go out alone."
Chang Lee, who headed his own news service, Tele-News, came in carrying a Vietnamese newspaper, which he showed me. "Congratulations, Boyle. You're a big hero."
There on the front page was the Agence France Presse story about the mutiny at Pace with me named as the correspondent carrying a petition from sixty-five Gls to Senator Kennedy.
A few moments later Art Lord called and said he had an idea.

The NBC office was just upstairs, so I felt I could make it safely.
"There still may be one chance to get you out of here before it's too late."
"I'm listening, Art." I was willing to try anything.
"You were wounded at Pace, right?"
"Shit," I said. "It was only a scratch."
"So what; anyway, you look like death warmed over."
"When was the last time you had any sleep?"
"I can't remember."
"Okay, then. We'll go over to the national press director's office and ask that he intervene for you on humanitarian grounds. We'll say you have to get to a doctor right away."
It was really a long shot. After the story broke, I doubted if even the press office would dare defy Thieu by interceding in my behalf. They may have already been in trouble for

issuing me a press card.

Art went with me to the press office and explained how I had been hit by shrapnel at Pace and that I was near collapse from exhaustion. The secretary at the press office looked very concerned. ‘“We know about your difficulties,” she said, “but I think you are a good person.” She turned to her boss and spoke in Vietnamese. “Yes,” she finally said, “we will help you get out of Vietnam.”

They gave me a letter from the national press office stating that since I had been wounded in action I should be granted a special exit visa on humanitarian grounds. When I left, the secretary lightly touched my arm and said, “Good luck, Mr. Boyle. You know, you are very lucky.”

I couldn’t believe it. Even with all the anti-Americanism in Vietnam, they were willing to risk everything just to help me. Art agreed to come along to the immigration center in case they tried to grab me there. But with the letter from the national press office, I got the exit visa in a few hours.

As I strapped myself into the seat of the big Pan Am 747, for the first time I felt I could relax. But the plane didn’t move.

“Are you Mr. Boyle?” asked a Vietnamese, leaning over my seat.

“Why?”

“Vietnamese Customs wants to see you about something.”

“About what?” I demanded.

“Something to do with your bag.”

“Bullshit,” I yelled. “The only way I’m leaving this plane

is to be dragged off."

The purser came over and said I would have to go. "We're under Vietnamese law here," he said. "Once they took two men off after the plane was beginning to taxi down the runway. They called us on the radio and ordered us back and then they came on and took them off. So you better go."

Just when I thought I had made it, they wanted me to go back. "Tell them that if they want me they are going to have to come up here and get me, and if they do that, there'll be one hell of a fight, right here on your fucking airplane with everybody watching."

"You must be crazy," said the purser.

"I don't give a shit what you think. Just tell them what I said."

He quickly left. About twenty minutes passed. Then another Vietnamese returned. "They said you can go," he told me.

The engines revved up and the plane started to taxi down the runway. As the plane left the ground, I felt like a prisoner who had made it over the wall. I was free—almost.

"Are you Mr. Boyle?" A man at the Honolulu airport Customs station flashed a badge with a gold eagle on it. I couldn't read the inscription.

"Yeah, why?"

"Would you please come with us."

"What for?"

"Step this way, please."

There were four of them; they took me into a small room.

"Do you have any tapes?'' said the one with the badge.

“Why do you want to know?”
He searched me and opened the cassette which had the tape from the men of Bravo Company. I had come too far to have it ripped off now, so I said to the guy while he was - fondling it:
“That tape is for the Congress of the United States. Do you happen to know the penalty for contempt of Congress?”
The agent looked startled. Maybe it was the tone of my voice—he couldn’t tell if I was bluffing or not—but he handed it back very quickly.
* * *
When my plane landed in San Francisco, I was met by about a dozen newspeople, including two of my closest friends, Frank Mariano and Ann Bryan. Frank told me the news: Senator Kennedy had publicly called for an investigation of the incident at Pace. The Army then pulled out all the men of Bravo Company, sending in Delta Company to replace them. The men of Bravo were sent to Firebase Timbuktu, to the rear, and were now out of danger. None of the men would be court-martialed. The Army had backed down.
A few days later, the men of Delta Company heard about the refusal of Bravo Company. When a Delta patrol was ordered out, twenty men refused to go.
Then the Army pulled out Delta Company, along with the entire company of artillery supporting the South Vietnamese in Cambodia. The monster guns which fired shells as big as tree trunks over a distance of thirty miles were left at Firebase Pace, spiked so they would be of no use to the NVA.

The U.S. Army was in retreat. The grunts had won.

Although the Army admitted pulling out the men of Bravo Company, Maj. Gen. Jack J. Wagstaff, commander of U.S. Forces for the Third Military Region in Vietnam, told the Associated Press that Bravo Company had been withdrawn "because of all this goddam flak, the possible harm it could do to company morale and in line with normal rotation policy." He went on to say:

"There was never any confrontation, never any refusal. There was never an opportunity. The only refusal, if you want to call it that, is that they told a newsman they weren't going to go."

While the rest of the world was reading Le Monde's account of what happened at Pace, the Army was effectively concealing the truth from the American people. Most American newspapers carried the AP story with Wagstaff's denial, not the French version.

Although my main objective was to save the lives of the men of Bravo Company, I wanted somehow to let the American people know the Army was still trying to cover up the facts. So I called a press conference in San Francisco the morning after I returned. First I read the AP story with Wagstaff's denials, then played parts of the tape made by the men of Bravo Company under fire, asking the several dozen newsmen present to decide for themselves who was telling the truth.

The Army so far had managed to keep the Saigon press corps away from the men of Bravo Company, but now there

was too much pressure. Although the AP was still reporting the Army version, UPI finally sent their correspondents to Firebase Timbuktu to interview Al Grana and the others, who called the patrol a “senseless suicide mission” and said their refusal was a “matter of common sense.” The story of Pace was now making headlines in the States and was being covered on network television.

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Since I had promised the men of Bravo Company that would personally place their petition in Senator Kennedy’s hands, I left the next morning for Washington. The senator was out of town, but his aides, Dale Dehan and Ed Martin, promised a meeting as soon as it could be arranged.

While in Washington I was asked by the People’s Coalition for Peace and Justice to testify at the People’s Tribunal Against Richard Nixon. There I met Don Luce. I told him I’d been unsuccessful in my attempt to find out what had happened to Long. Luce told me he’d heard Long was still alive, in a military prison, still continuing the struggle. Long had even managed to smuggle out a letter, which was printed in the New York Times.

I heard from some friends in the press that the Pentagon was trying to discredit me personally, calling the story of Pace ‘‘scavenger journalism,” so I flew to New York to meet with leaders of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, the group which staged the march on the Capitol in May 1971. Al Hubbard and Mike Oliver, two of the group’s national directors, wanted to press Kennedy to go all-out for the

grunts at Pace. A dramatic appeal from the brother of John and Robert Kennedy on national television using the GIs' petition and tape could have a tremendous impact on the nation, they felt. A key vote to end the war was coming up in the House, and a switch of a few votes was all they figured would be needed to end the war.

I called Kennedy's staff from New York. They promised to arrange for the veterans to meet with the senator, but when returned to Washington I was told he was too busy. At this time I began to hear of divisiveness within the veterans' antiwar groups. John Kerry, the most publicized vet spokesman, had just flown to Washington to advise Kennedy's staff that the senator stay away from the Pace affair.

Tim Butz, one of the leaders of the Washington, D.C., Veterans' Coalition, hearing of Kerry's trip and of Senator Kennedy's refusal to meet with the men, called a meeting of several veterans' groups in the area. A letter to Kennedy was drafted and a delegation of eight vets was selected to present it at the senator's office. The next day I went with the eight to Kennedy's office.

While we were waiting to see the senator, Ed Martin, his top aide, remarked that if Kennedy came out strongly for the grunts he would be accused of using the GIs for his own political purposes. Kennedy, he said, had bitterly attacked the charge on Hamburger Hill and been clobbered for it. Martin admitted that Kerry had met with the Kennedy staff. "He's a bright boy," he said. (It has been rumored that Kerry

has been slated to run for Congress in Kennedy's home state of Massachusetts.)

At last Senator Kennedy arrived. I handed the petition to him, as I'd promised the grunts I would, and asked him to help.

I told Tim Butz and the other vets what Kennedy said: in effect, he wouldn't do anything more than he'd already done—write to Defense Secretary Melvin Laird calling for an investigation of the Pace affair. He would not make the dramatic appeal to end the war they had hoped for, so the vets decided to go to other congressional leaders for help. During the next week, I saw as many congressmen as could, trying to tell them what I had seen in Vietnam. Rep. Ron Dellums was very sympathetic, though he was afraid the pull-out vote coming up would lose in the House. Sen. Fred Harris issued a press statement about Pace and sent a strong letter to Laird, stating: "I have received a tape recording of a dozen men [who] raise several important and disturbing questions and convey the impression that their government no longer cares about them." He asked for a full congressional inquiry into the Army's attempt to cover up the incident at Pace.

Sen. Mike Gravel's staff expressed interest in my information about counterfraggings, especially what General Mataxis had told me in Cambodia about the counterfraggings in the Americal Division.

Then I saw Sen. Barry Goldwater. There have, he said,

been revolts at other times in American military history, even the revolutionary war.

I called Rep. Paul “Pete” McCloskey, the antiwar Republican from California running for President against Richard Nixon in the New Hampshire primary. At his home in Virginia - we listened to the tape of the men of Bravo Company. He was visibly moved and asked me to hold a press conference with him.

The next day McCloskey called Kennedy, inviting him to join the press conference. Kennedy refused. Asked if the senator would at least sit in on the press conference, since the petition had been addressed to him, Ed Martin said no.

So it was just McCloskey and me.

“The situation is clear,” he told the thirty newsmen gathered in the Capitol hearing room.*

* Entered in the Congressional Record, Oct. 28, 1971, H1020-21. Representative McCloskey also had entered in the Record of that date the petition from the men of Bravo Company and other statements of GI dissatisfaction and protest.—ED.

Many Gls in Vietnam are no longer willing to obey orders. To order an offensive operation today is to invite wholesale mutiny. There is a growing danger of confrontation between American troops and their officers which could prove ugly and disastrous. There is likewise a growing danger of confrontation, if not combat, between the diminishing number of American troops and various groups of disaffected South Vietnamese.

This being the case, I suggest that the President has an obligation, as Commander in Chief, to preserve the remaining esprit de corps and professional competence of our Army by disengaging from Vietnam at the earliest practicable date.

If he fails to do so, the Congress must assume that responsibility. It behooves us to withdraw from Vietnam before the professional reputation and professional competence of the Army as well as its deterrent capability in the future is damaged beyond repair.

McCloskey then pointed to the widespread fragging, the breakdown of the units outside of Vietnam and the racial unrest, and concluded:

With the publication of the Pentagon papers and a growing public realization of the enormity of the deceit practiced upon the American people—and even the Congress—in order to get us involved in Vietnam—keep us there—and justify our remaining there—it is no wonder that our servicemen rebel at being asked to stay behind to preserve the Thieu-Ky regime and to preserve the pride and prestige of a President who does not want to be the first American President to lose a war.

A few days later the House voted on setting a deadline for the end of the war. The measure was defeated by about thirty votes.

Postlude: The Flower of the Dragon

November 6, 1971

Specialist Al Grana

Firebase Timbuktu

Republic of Vietnam

Dear Al:

Forgive me for not writing to you sooner but this was the first chance to stop and really do my head. Some good people have let me use their cabin in Carmel, California. Now a warm fire is going and I can look out at the Pacific Ocean rolling against the white cliffs. I have just finished the first draft of my book, about what you and the men did at Pace. It's important, I think, that people know as soon as possible what happened at Pace and what is happening in Vietnam.

I don't know what to do, though. I feel a deep sense of frustration. I've tried, but it wasn't enough. Maybe it was my fault; I don't know. Maybe people don't want to know. don't know what it is, but you were right, they are not going to let the truth get out. They are too powerful, the wire services, the newspapers, the politicians, the magazines. It is just too much to fight.

Maybe to them you are just meat. They say there were "only eight" killed last week. That's fine, if you weren't one of the eight. I'm pissed off, I admit it. Maybe that's why I failed to get them to listen; I was too angry. But I'm sorry, Al, I couldn't help it.

I doubt now that the truth will ever get out; nobody wants

to know. It's easier on their consciences to believe Nixon.
I wish I could really tell them what it's like at Pace. I wish I could take every senator and every newspaper editor to Pace for just one hour, to let them live in the mud with the rats, to let them see their buddies bleed right in front of them.
They wouldn't listen. You can't make people listen if they don't want to; they just turn off.
No matter what happens, though, one thing is clear: you and the others won a great victory over the lifers. Both Kennedy and Sen. Fred Harris assured me that they won't let the Army try to hang your asses and that they'll keep after Laird —in fact, it is the Pentagon which is now on the defensive.
When I told you guys when I left that I'd try to have you out in two days, I never believed it could be done. But when Kennedy called for that investigation, the Army had to buckle under. When your replacements, Delta Company, heard about your refusal to fight, they quit too, and the shit really hit the fan at the Pentagon. They were forced to pull all U.S. troops out of Pace completely.
When you guys started the whole thing, you were taking on the entire U.S. military complex, and that's tough. The brass knew that if they let you get away with what you were doing, and other units found out about it, they'd be in trouble. Why would anybody in his right mind go out and get killed in Nam when you guys got away with telling the lifers to go fuck themselves?
You not only got away with it, you're heroes to a hell of a lot of brothers and sisters here; when you come home you'll see that.

You guys were right about the Army trying to cover up the story. After I gave the story to the French when I got back to Saigon, the story was cabled to New York and then to Paris, where it made all the papers. The editors of Associated Press and United Press in New York fired off “rockets” to their

bureau chiefs in Saigon, telling them to get off their ass and find out what’s happening. UPI and AP hadn’t heard a single word about Pace, but a newsman hates to tell his boss he doesn’t know what’s happening. So the American wire services frantically tried to find out from the Army. The briefer at the five o’clock follies told the press he hadn’t heard about any mutiny.

By this time every journalist in Saigon was trying to get up to Timbuktu to find out who was lying, me or the Army. The AP had its ass on the line, going with the Army pitch all the way. They would look pretty foolish telling hundreds of subscribing newspapers, “Sorry, we goofed slightly. I guess there was a refusal.” The Army tried to keep them away from you guys to hush up the story as long as it could. The story was becoming too big in the States and the press was getting more insistent about getting to Timbuktu.

Wire services like to kick each other in the balls every chance they get. UPI- I guess it was my friend Dieter Ludwig—finally got to see you and filed this story: “GIs who told their officers they would refuse to make a night ambush patrol outside embattled Firebase Pace said today it was a ‘senseless suicide mission’ and their refusal was a ‘matter of common

sense." The story also told about your letter to Kennedy and that it was read into a tape and then spirited out of Pace and later out of Vietnam by me.

Now it was obvious to many that the Army had been lying. But then something happened. The story suddenly died. The Washington Post, as far as I know, carried the two AP reports giving the Army version, but the UPI story didn't get in. This, the newspaper read by most congressmen, was in effect giving only one version. A newspaper doesn't have to use a wire service story, it can select what it wishes, and the Post decided to run the AP, and not the AFP or the UPI, story. I offered to write a story in Saigon for their correspondent, but he wasn't interested.

Instead he kept running stories about the Army denials. More people in America were reading about the denials than the actual event.

got to know a lot more vets since coming back. In Washington I crashed for a few days in a big rambling vets' commune which also serves as headquarters for the various vets' antiwar groups. Of all the people I told about what was happening to the grunts, the only ones who really listened, mean really tuned in, were the Vietnam vets. They, more than anyone else, saw the significance of what you did. They knew you had won.

There's something happening, man, it's in the air, I swear it. There are about two million vets all over this country, and a hell of a lot of them are getting it together. There's this

beer hall on DuPont Circle in Washington where a bunch of the vets hang out. There are guys there like Beagle, who was a Marine recon point man. *‘I killed three hundred VC, man,” he told me, “and you know what I found out when I got back here? I killed the wrong people. Ain’t that a mind blower?” And there is Jim, who had part of his leg shot away. “Do you know what it’s like to shoot a man in the face? I mean, see him die?” He said when he came back from Nam, like Beagle and the other vets in the bar he felt betrayed by his own country, sent to bleed in a war to make millionaires richer. Jim got drunk one night, and he got so fed up he decided to go see Nixon personally. Limping past the White House guard at four A.M., he was jumped by several security men and whisked off to a psycho ward. They just couldn’t understand why an ex-Marine who had seen his buddies blown away in Vietnam and had come home to find no job and no future, a man who will never walk right again, why he would want to see Nixon and shout, “My God, you got to stop this shit.” He must be crazy, they thought. But there are lots of crazies around like him, and they’re really getting fed up with the way this country is heading.

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For the first time we’re seeing young men beg on the streets; you can’t go a block in D.C. without someone asking for a dime. The worst part is to see vets, their floppy bush hats pulled down, ask you for a handout. I gave one a quarter and asked him where he’d been; turns out he was in the Arizona Territory the same time as me. ‘“No shit, man. That

was bad then."

We rapped for about half an hour. He said he couldn't find work. There just isn't any. "Things are bad in this country," he said. "Just look around, man, you have to be blind not to see it." There are three hundred fifty thousand vets out of work; even the government admits it. They gave it up to go to Nam and now their country is saying no thanks.

You tell somebody you just came back from Nam and they shun you like you got some rare disease. They expect you to shove a needle in their arm, or whip out a bayonet or something.

A New York State Chamber of Commerce pamphlet even urged businessmen not to hire vets because they were junkies. Man, ain't that a foot up the ass.

There were a lot of vets who would gather at this beer hall every night. Some wore Vietnam Veterans Against the War pins; some, like Beagle, wore their camouflage jackets, others wore bush hats or Montagnard bracelets. But whatever they wore, they all had that look in their eyes. They've seen it.

And you could tell by the way they greeted each other, slapping the skin like you did at Pace—man, that other guy, even though you just met him, he's your brother. It was the same feeling you all had at Pace. You didn't give a shit who the other grunt was, he was you and you were him. That feeling hasn't died, Al, it's getting stronger.

And we'd rap. We'd rap for hours. The vets were fed up with the people running the antiwar demonstration in Washington. "If they took over this country, they'd simply replace the eagles on the generals' uniforms with red stars.

But it would be the same," said one young vet.

"Right on, man," said Cheyenne, another vet who had just got out of the military hospital. All the vets said they felt that many in the antiwar movement treated "their GIs'' the same way white liberals treated "their Negroes' during the sit-ins down South. It was like the white missionary bringing the word to the heathens. They felt they were being used, that there was something in it for the other guy. "I don't think they really give a shit about us," Beagle said.

We talked about what could be done to end the war. After the People's Coalition demonstration flopped, a lot of the vets decided they would never do anything with them again. Some even believe the demonstrators were actually hurting the cause more than helping it.

Beagle had a bushy blond beard and chewed a cigar when he spoke. "I've been getting fed up with their whole trip," he said. "I'm fed up with their ego-tripping, their phony Marxist rhetoric, and their calling all the cops pigs."

A guy named John O'Connor saw one cop chase several hundred demonstrators during the Mayday demonstration. "One fucking cop," he said. "Some revolutionaries."

Each night our rap sessions at the beer hall grew, until some nights there were about twenty vets, with their girlfriends, bitching about the way everything was going. We all felt powerless. Our country was getting deeper into trouble, but what could anybody do?

"They're all the fucking same," said Jim. "Can you tell the

- difference between Muskie and Nixon?”
“Right on, man,” Cheyenne added. “There’s no difference between the two parties.”
One night Beagle came in with a piece of paper. He was excited. “We hear this.”

He read the Declaration of Independence. “Man, it says it right here. If the government fucks you over, it’s not only your right but your fucking duty, man, your duty to bring it down. Those guys like Jefferson knew what they were doing.’
A lot of the guys had never read the Declaration of Independence, or at least hadn’t paid much attention to it.
“It says it right here,” Beagle went on. “If Jefferson and Paine and those dudes were here tonight, do you think they’d be with Nixon or with us?”
“Shit, man,” said Cheyenne, “Nixon’s the same as King George.”
“Right on,” Beagle added. “The people of this country have been fucked over, cheated, and lied to by all of them. Johnson’s the same as Nixon, and Nixon’s the same as Muskie or Humphrey: they all want to screw you.”
“That’s what this whole war was,” Jim said, “a big ripoff. Fifty-five thousand guys died to make some people rich.”
“Everybody’s always trying to sell somebody out,” said Cheyenne. “Labor leaders sell out their membership, politicians sell out the voters, and even our own guys sell us out.”
“That’s why this war is still going,” Jim said. “There’s something in it for everybody.”

It was the troops who pulled off the French Revolution and it was rebelling soldiers and sailors who stormed the Winter Palace in Russia in 1917. If there are too many more Kent States, or Jackson States, or Atticas, and the people revolt, I think the grunts are going to be with the people, not with Nixon and the lifers. And I think the Pentagon knows it.

I hope that someday, before it is too late, the American people learn the truth. That you men of Bravo Company are a cross-section of this nation. That the sixty-five men who signed the petition to Kennedy represent a true indicator of where our generation is at -fed up with the lies, the deceptions, of our own government.

I'm sorry I've written such a long-winded letter, but since don't write often, I usually write a lot when I do. I haven't even told you about Kennedy.

Washington was a bad trip. I felt far better with you guys at Pace. When you walk into a senator's office, you're met by a woman with a smile. Everybody's always smiling, but you get the feeling they don't really mean it. Each senator has his own Praetorian Guard (with pinched collars and modish sideburns instead of armor) and it's their job to keep their bosses as far from the proletariat as possible. They write their speeches, answer their mail, make arrangements for tours; I suspect the legislator himself often really doesn't know what's going on.

When I told some of the vets at the beer hall near DuPont Circle that it seemed Kennedy wasn't going all out for you

guys, every one of them said pretty much the same thing: You were their brothers and nobody fucks over a brother. The next day there were eight vets in Kennedy's office, some in jungle fatigues, some wearing end-the-war buttons. As a Capitol cop nervously paced outside, Kennedy's aides promised a meeting.

I met Kennedy the next morning. I was with Ed Martin, a Boston newsman, when Kennedy came in.

"I've come a long way to bring this and the men who signed it wanted me to tell you something," I said as he sat down. "You know, there were times when I didn't think I'd make it. I was scared."

"Yes, I know what it must have been like," he said.

I guess I told him everything you wanted me to say. That you men were told you were going to Vietnam to fight for democracy, only to discover that you were fighting to make Vietnamese and American profiteers rich and to suppress a people seeking freedom. That you were left to rot in Vietnam; now, nobody gives a shit any more. People back in the world say, there were only eight killed in Vietnam last week.

But what is it like, Senator, if you're one of the eight? Would you have gone on that patrol, would you have given up your life for Thieu and Nixon? Would Nixon himself, would he walk point? Senator, I said, none of these men want to be the last to die. They love life, just as much as you, Senator, or Nixon, or the head of General Motors. They have just as much right to live as anyone else. Why throw away their lives any more?

Haven't we killed enough?

I think I made Kennedy feel uneasy, because he stood up very quickly. "What do you want me to do?" he said. "I've done everything I can."

I didn't say anything.

Then he continued, saying it was he who had raised hell about the charge on Hamburger Hill. *"I can't stop the patrolling or the killing," he said. "I know how you must feel, seeing your buddies blown away, but what do you want me to do?"

"I don't know, Senator," I said. "Look, I don't want to pressure you. You've got to look into your own head, into your own conscience, and ask yourself if you are doing everything you can. I can't answer that."

He looked at me for a long time.

"Senator, I'd like you to see this," I said.

It was a photograph I took from the helicopter over Pace when I tried to land the first time. A South Vietnamese soldier had been shot through the neck. With each heartbeat, a huge purple glob of blood would ooze out of his mouth, falling on his shirt. Within a few minutes his shirt was soaked with blood. He knew he was dying. When the chopper blades started spinning, his blood whipped all over the cockpit, all over the medics, the other wounded, the crew, all over me.

Kennedy looked at the photograph and then handed it back. As he started to leave, I said one last thing to him. "We all know this country is in a bad way. Most of those guys at

Pace really didn't think their petition would do any good;

like the rest of us, they have nearly given up hope. They've been fucked over too many times. They still tried, they still had hope, but I don't think they'll take it much longer. Time is running out."

He stopped but didn't speak, and then he left.

I don't know if he listened, Al. Maybe they really don't care, I don't know. I don't know what it'll take to end this war. I don't know what it'll take to make them listen. A half million can march, and they don't listen. The polls show that the majority of the American people want peace, and they don't listen. The grunts themselves, they're throwing their lives away for nothing, but they don't listen. I don't know what it'll take.

If it'll take words to end this senseless slaughter, I don't know what more can be said that hasn't already been said. Your tape, I think, says it, but again they didn't listen.

The most moving plea for peace I have ever heard was given by a young leader of the Vietnamese underground, Nguyen Hong Long. I wish you could have known him as did, but now he is gone, like the thousands of other Vietnamese who fought for freedom. In December of 1969 he tried to free the island concentration camp of Con Son, where there are thousands of political prisoners. His ship, the Prajna, was intercepted by a flotilla of Thieu's ships on the Mekong River. When the Prajna was seized, Long jumped on top of one of Thieu's gunboats and called for the soldiers of both sides to lay down their weapons and end the war themselves:

“The war lovers hate us because they know that they are wrong. They call us draft dodgers and evaders, deserters and betrayers. But the world knows that we are the first soldiers for a humanity without war, that we are the first soldiers in

the last battle of man against the beast in himself.”

At Pace a lot of the guys in your platoon said they had nothing against the NVA soldiers. They were just scared guys like you.

Long said that someday soldiers of both sides would sece one another not as enemies but as brothers. If anything good comes out of this war, maybe it will be that. For a short while at Pace you didn’t shoot at the North Vietnamese and they didn’t shoot at you.

You know, Al, I'll never forget something Long once said to me. “No matter what happens to me,” he said, “or what happens to any of us, it doesn’t matter. They can kill us all, but they can’t kill an idea.”

When the Hoat Vu took Long on Christmas Eve in 1969, saw something in their faces while they were beating him. It was fear. You can chain a man’s body, but you can’t enslave his mind. The only prison is of the mind. If a man feels free, he is free;

When I went to see Long’s mother to tell her what had happened, told her about his dream, the dream he may never live to see come true. That all men, everywhere, someday, would be free. I think, Al, that many now share Long’s dream. Every time a man rises from his knees and shouts,

“I am free,” they become more afraid, because they know they can’t stop him with bullets, or torture, or repression. They can imprison a million men like Long, but they can’t stop the idea of freedom.

I think, Al, Lieutenant Colonel McAffee saw that. And he was afraid, they were all afraid. When a grunt tells his sergeant to go to hell, when a prisoner demands his freedom. they can use force, imprison the body, but they can’t imprison the mind. When a man says, “I am free,” there’s nothing they can do. Even if he dies, he dies a free man.

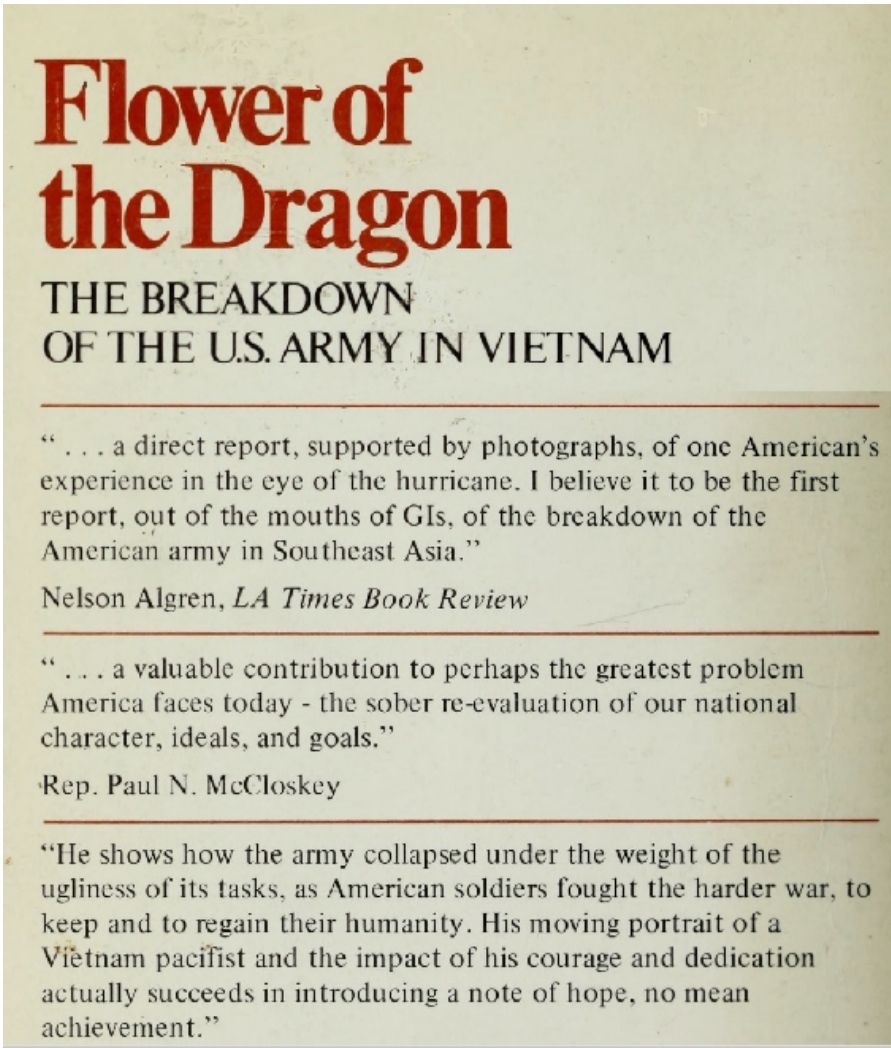
It’s that simple, Long’s idea. If you want to be free, all you have to do is break the chains of the mind. That is what you and the others proved at Firebase Pace.

The name of the underground movement which tried to stop the war in 1969 was the Long Hoa. “The Vietnamese believe strongly in the era of the Long Hoa, the Flower of the Dragon, when the spiritual power in man shall overcome the brutal force in himself, when love shall overcome death, when peace shall overcome war,” Long said.

When I saw Long’s mother, I told her about the Flower of the Dragon. She had heard of the legend, but until then she had never understood it. The legend says that during the time of the dragon, the worst time for mankind, a small budding flower will spring up. And it will spread its petals throughout the world. It will be like a new evolution. Man will love and be free.

This is the eve of the Flower of the Dragon.

Back Cover



Trade distribution by

Ramparts Press Monthly Review Press

San Francisco 94101

ISBN 0-87867-036-X Order No. RP 036X

Cover by Terry Down

Quotes:

The biggest and meanest rats in Saigon had become army generals, police chiefs or key officeholders. Like President Thieu, many of them had Swiss bank accounts and villas in Europe. They had plush mansions at the old French seacoast resort of Vung Tau and mountain villas in cool, lush Dalat. For them the war was great; it made them rich. America was a sugar-candy mountain, a soda fountain of money juice that never ran dry.

“Right on,” Beagle added. “The people of this country have been fucked over, cheated, and lied to by all of them. Johnson’s the same as Nixon, and Nixon’s the same as Muskie or Humphrey: they all want to screw you.”
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“That’s why this war is still going,” Jim said.
“There’s something in it for everybody.”

It was not unusual for bounties to be raised by troops in a unit to pay the soldier who actually did the fragging. Each soldier would chip in and bounties could come to hundreds, even thousands, of dollars.

He said it in a very matter-of-fact way, not
as a boast or a threat but almost calmly:
“If they fuck with us, they are going to die.”
Doc Hampton was not alone. All over Vietnam, Gls were
fragging their officers and their lifer noncoms. On some
patrols, if a lifer was too “gung ho,” he was shot in the back
by his men, who would report he was killed in combat.

We were by what Long said. It seemed simple enough:
"War would end when the soldiers refused to fight it."

“He shows how the army collapsed under the weight of the
ugliness of its tasks, as American soldiers fought the harder war, to
keep and to regain their humanity. His moving portrait of a
Vietnam pacifist and the impact of his courage and dedication
actually succeeds in introducing a note of hope, no mean
achievement.”
Noam Chomsky